Anarchy and Nihilism: Consequences

Aragorn!

Contents

Introduction to Consequences

This is the second in a series of pamphlets that draw connections between the tradition of the political nihilist tendency of 19th century Czarist Russia and current anarchist thought.

As Nihilism, Anarchy, and the 21st Century (the first pamphlet in the series) begged the question of what relevance nihilism has to anarchy it could be argued that these essays beg the opposite question. What does anarchy have to offer nihilism?

That the range of anarchists includes the clowns from protest alley, micrometer-toting specialists of oppression-identification, and Marxists who wear black flags isn't a condemnation of anarchist ideas but is a significant reason for pause. In that pause we have to challenge our assumptions about anarchy. What do we really share with others in the big-tent (or should it be called a circus tent) of anarchism?

These essays are increasingly specific. Perhaps this will give more people a toe-hold so that they scale their own heights. At the end of these essays there is a specific invitation.

There have been several opportunities for me to speak on nihilism over the past two years. What has been surprising in that time hasn't been the apparent antagonism but the quiet interest and excitement. It is still unclear how this interest is going to materialize into a discrete practice, but I won't be alone in answering that question.

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Chapter 1: Consequences — On revolutionary despair

> A nihilist is a person who does not bow down to any authority, who does not accept any principle on faith, however much that principle may be revered.
>
> *Arkady*

1. There is not a liberating vision for humanity. Every so-called revolutionary at best fails and at worst establishes yet another fiefdom. The rhetoric of liberation makes for great bedtime stories, keeps starry-eyed dreamers warm at night, and should be seen for exactly what it is. Charlatans either believe that they speak for the oppressed and that the weight of their opinion is greater because they summon the power of representation, or that they are the first ones to come up with the ideas that they have.

2. The idea of a singular, recursive, or iterative approach to positive social change works better in a classroom than in lived experience. The kind of social science that results from these explorations resembles a secular monotheism. As an organization of society, or a modeling of the transformation of society, apocalypse has a long track record and it is entirely reactionary. This is to say that whether called an insurrection, a revolution, a singularity, or a collapse, a similar thing is intended: more of the same.

3. Is the quiet misery of daily life preferable to a reactionary rupture? The lesson of the German Revolution (1918–1919) is the lesson of historical Anarchism: glorious failure. Whether it is France, Spain, Germany, or Russia the story of social revolution has not been one of triumph. Instead, and at best, it has been a set of stories about moments worth living.

4. How many lives are we willing to sacrifice for our moment? Shall we stack them for barricades? Fill the trenches with them after the tanks roll in? Use their blood to write the history books that tell of our glorious time?

5. Nechayev did not tell us how to be good people. His concept of an army, or even a secret society, of revolutionary supermen is laughable, but perhaps the reason for laughter isn't immediately clear. Lenin was clear how much the Catechism influenced his thought. It was The Prince for the revolutionary set. The Catechism provides a moral roadmap, an action plan that has demonstrable results. List your human targets in order of their crimes, harden yourself, and eliminate these targets in order. The greatest criminals are the first eliminated.

6. Psychology has made the role of superman an embarrassing one. The social milieu of radicalism only allows room for sensitive inhuman success stories. Broken people are highly

favored as long as they are broken along the lines of survival and politeness. The Nechayevs of today fade out of sight after no greater crimes than petty larceny and broken hearts. The Machiavellis implement simple strategies to make sure the supermen stay occupied with irrelevancies.

7. Revolutionary strategy is a failure from the perspective of providing a mechanism to get from here to there. This is not to say that there is not the possibility of wide social transformation but that to the extent that it follows the lead of the glorious losers (anarchists), Nechys, or Micheals of the past it will fail in succeeding either on its own terms or on the terms of being a liberated social change.

8. This is not to say that we are free or satisfied. We are at an impasse. This impasse is one part frustration at the rhetoric of transition available to us (without words it is hard to understand where one is or where others are), another part anger at the grinding death of a denatured daily life and another part ennui at the futility of our social or political power. Without the ability to control our own life, political action, and social relationships, our vivid imagination lay fallow. There is nothing to eat here but a gray paste that keeps us alive. But for what?

9. This problem extends to the west generally. We understand that past formulations are out of date. We lack for new ones.

10. New efforts are being made but they are orthogonal to the approach of the humanist West. They are, to put it gently, more severe than the values and theory of modernity allow for. They are, ultimately, goal-less. These are actions that are interpreted by others but move so rapidly as to be entirely chased by the mullahs, fatwas, and analysts. These new efforts are the language of the disenfranchised humanity. There is no hope. There are only casualties.

11. The suicide bomber is the muse of our time. They do not inspire us to sing of freedom, justice, and dignity but of consequence.

Chapter 2: Nihilism and Science

There is the history of nihilism that idealized natural sciences as a single solution to the question of material existence without God and another that would critique science upon empirical, ideological, and ethical grounds.

"A decent chemist is twenty times more useful than any poet,"

Bazarov

The history of nihilism is of a moment in time. Russia in the 1860s was a suffocating place. The majority of the population were serfs breaking under their new freedom (to make payments to their former lords by decree of the Czar in exchange for working their land) or choking under the superstition and conservatism of the Orthodox Church. Russia was also at a crossroads: having proven itself among the great empires of Europe after the defeat of Napoleon it also found itself an intellectual backwater. Very little of the democratic unrest that had affected the Continent had consequence in Russia. Even Czar Alexander II's dramatic move of freeing the serfs was more motivated by his romantic sensibility after having read Turgenev's "A Sportsman's Sketches" than an urge to transform Russian society.

As a consequence of this environment historic nihilism embraced positions that we could largely understand as reactionary rather than as intentional. (This is something that is endemic to revolutionary traditions and, arguably, should be included in their definition.) Given how short the life span of the historic nihilist period was (spanning both the foundational and revolutionary period) it is hard to imagine what the consequence of a rigorous universal skepticism would have been if it had had the time to develop and transform. What would a group of people with nothing to lose have been capable of?

If philosophy is the practice of tilling the earth then it is no wonder that most thinkers spend their time wandering overturned soil searching for lost seeds and replanting. If nihilism was the political philosophy of skepticism in a time when society was framed by the Orthodox Church and Czarist regime it's no wonder that it left very little room for tradition. If the Church represented spiritualism, superstition and sentimentality then a philosophy for the modern time would have to reject all of these things. If the Czar represented the ossified autocratic bigotry of a monarchy then freedom would have to be the progressive, democratic republicanism of France. This is the limitation of parochial skepticism.

How is inquiry limited?

The history of science is a semantic journey through eras. Science was once concerned with the formation of the world along with how we should live in it and was indistinguishable from Philosophy. The terms were synonymous. Later there was fragmentation: understanding the world through experimentation and sense perception (empiricism) became a discipline distinct from

understanding the world through reasoning (Rationalism). This dialectic was resolved in the scientific world by Newton's combining of the axiomatic proof with the mechanical discipline of physical observation resulting in the system of verifiable prediction that largely remains intact.

Science became a codified and bureaucratic process that involved the relationship between the practitioners of science, financiers of science, and an increasing number of Scientific Societies (post-16th century). The role of a Scientist became distinct from that of one who sought knowledge about the natural world. A Scientist was one who both went through training that framed the scope of their inquiry but, to succeed, because adroit at the political machinations of court, papal, and eventually secular society.

There were discontents to this normalization of inquiry. Alchemists blended understandings of multiple theoretical and spiritual traditions in the pursuit of solutions to speculatively enormous problems (transmutation, age, disease). The heterodoxy that alchemists relied upon was eliminated by the emphasis on quantitative experimentation, and reproducible results.

Technology, in the form of the Industrial Revolution, as an organization of social life insulated homogeneity by delivering results. Technology is best understood as a separate but related field of inquiry from Science with a field of vision further narrowed by the motivation of creating applications. The mass production of technology has never been the result of any other force than the desires of power. In terms of the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th century this looked like the transformation of the social life of England into one of an urban population dominated by factories. It also involved the extraction of resources across half the globe (India being a generous source of capital for industrial England) into the control of very few.

In the name of efficiency the product is the goal not the process of discovery and examination.

What is the limitation of specialization? Questions are no longer the pursuit of technicians or philosophers, answers are. Solutions to human problems are framed in material terms along entirely different lines than the cause. Corrective lenses do not cure bad eyesight, or stop one from watching television or staring at a computer screen, but allow one to continue exactly the pursuits that eyesight is good for. This kind of leveling exemplifies the motivation of specialization. If the structure of daily life forces certain kind of behavior (for instance the ability to see books and screens) then the kind of characteristics that could develop by people without sight are left undiscovered. As daily life constrains our options further we are forced into narrower and narrow tunnels. Eventually we find that we have chosen one thing, at the cost of every other thing, and in the name of survival.

What form should our skepticism take?

There is an active conversation among radicals and greens that begs response. The classic presentation would be a dichotomy between the allegation that technology is neutral on the one hand and that it embeds an essential 'negative' value on the other. Clearly technology is neutral only to the extent that you assume the values of the present order. If those values are not assumed then technology is not any different than history, philosophy, or science. They are the weapons that power use to fragment and control the population. One cannot understand our society without having a working, theoretical, and practical knowledge of technology and as a result most will choose to. The value of understanding our society is up for debate though.

If, following the nihilists of the 1860's, we were to advocate for a parochial skepticism then it would be enough to revolt against rent, usury, asphalt, bureaucrats and their henchmen, etc, etc. If we were to respond even further in kind it would be against the excessive aspects of our society that most resemble Czarist Russia. Our response would look like the opposite of the moral majoritarians and large government fetishists. Instead of valorizing natural science it is possible that this line of thought would lead to an ascetic ethical system along the lines of anarchists that eschew digital technology for analog. This far, and no further! would be their motto.

Skepticism ascends!

Assuming that parochialism is a limitation, which is probably true in the light of the failure of revolutionary movements of the counter-culture, then what is next for contrarians. What would a universal skepticism look like as a method of inquiry, social form, and practice? Would the nihilist practice of today look more like the obsessive scientist of Fathers and Sons or the paranoid murderer of Crime and Punishment.

If a political nihilism is a specific rejection of the world as-it-is it is still make priorities. Nihilism still has a legacy. The reason that the positive program of a Nihilism today wouldn't include a DIY naturalist science isn't just because of the implication of science having changed over the past 150 years but because the very notion of a positive program has changed in the eye of radicals. Any evaluation of a nihilist program has to take into account exactly how tentative it would be. A universal skepticism runs into similar problems that a universal positivism does, who exactly does the universalizing?

We will begin, with this limitation in mind, an evaluation of three specific approaches that both overlap and are contained within a nihilist perspective: Critique as practice, Avocation of the Deed, and Negation — as rhetoric, practice, and form.

Rhetorical negation is not the existential navel-gazing that appears indistinguishable from ennui. It is the position that political engagement with the present order is inconsequential but that articulating that political position is not. The writings of Tristan Tzara exemplify this position.

The practice of negation may very well be an artifact of the denatured intellectual environment of North America but represents the active non-activism that confuses participation in political projects without tying them to political (and politicized) social movements as an 'armchair' activity. This is a practice without strategy, possibly done for its own reward. The activities of many anarchist reading groups qualify for the position.

Formal negation is likely the most widely held political nihilist position. It is the practice of not submitting to the aggression of the dominant order by avoiding it. The sentiment that one does not attend political protests because they do not enjoy the presence of the police or do not vote because every choice on a ballot is shit are examples of this position.

The thread that runs through all of the negation approaches is the stance of non-participation as political practice. This lends itself to the criticism of nihilism as solipsism which serves as a nice counter-point to the criticism of leftists as rhetorically self-sacrificing moralists.

Avocation of the Deed would be the most stereotypical nihilist political position. Many would-be-nihilists use the claim of strategic avocation as a shield to discuss their desires. Knocking over electrical towers and phone lines are their own reward, linking them to The Generalized Struggle

for Human Emancipation™ is window dressing. The question of sensational actions, of horrific deeds, remains a central question for radicals of all stripes.

The legacy of Propaganda by the Deed is evaluated incorrectly. On the one hand the vast majority of PbtD actions were not violent actions against capitalists, leaders, and bureaucrats but the practice of daily life. On the other there is an argument that if the revolutionary struggle was doomed to failure, due to lack of preparation and a thousand other reasons, that going out shooting (which PbtD could safely be described as) was a valid exit strategy. What were the alternatives? Life as an exile chasing every hint of Revolution like the Communards? Chasing every summit hoping for another Seattle?

Today's avocation differs from PbtD by placing the emphasis on the deed rather than the history or public relations consequence. This may entail giving up a certain kind of power, since others become the managers of your message, as in the case of suicide bombers but the clarity of the deed speaks louder than any politician's message.

The practice of Critique entails using a suite of empirical and intellectual tools to evaluate the behavior and actions of others. It is a practice that does not stand alone but leans on others and in that way is the most social nihilist practice. The idea that nothing should stand: belief, value, or paradigm and no positive program installed in their place is at the core of the nihilist project.

Conclusion

Nihilism in the 21st century differs from that of the 19th on one important question. Rather than being a reactionary political practice resulting from a specific political context (Czarist Russia) it now draws its inspiration from an understanding of the philosophical trajectory of 20th century, the revolutionary movements of the 19th and 20th, and a sober understanding of exactly how little these well-springs offer one who would resist.

In hindsight natural science was the liberating response to a society dominated by mystical reverence for leader and God. In the absence of a simple response to today's similar and extended problems an anarchist nihilism offers a category, a frame of reference, rather than the pat answer political discourse tends to favor. Nihilists will not become black-clad boy scouts, summit hoppers, or politicize thriving off of the detritus of an excessive society. There will not be a comfort for those of us whose rejection of this society includes its opposition.

Chapter 3: Now is the time (and yet we wait)!

We are necessarily impatient. We can't stand paying rent one more month. Being forced from cradle to toilet to classroom to cubicle to grave makes us boring. We hate ourselves and our condition even more.

But what to do? We are not so naïve as to believe the leftist line about 'revolutionary' groups like the Weatherman. We don't accept that the problem with their strategy was a lack of mass base. We see their problem as lack of ambition.

Not only can you not bring down the castle walls by running full speed into them but it may be that this world has become sophisticated enough to no longer need castles or even physical presence to a large degree. This is the problem with most critiques of postmodernity. They assume that the postmodern would be a device used by the dispossessed in our arsenal against this world. This is not the case. What is the case is that the postmodern (and its accompanying condition) is yet another tool in the arsenal of this order. Postmodernism is the terrain upon which this order's current travels can be mapped. This can particularly be seen in discussions of virtuality, identity, and the politics of deconstruction (as relevant tenure track pursuit and little else).

The first premise of postmodernism is that there are no 'meta' narratives. There is no single history or anthropology or system that enables us to know the real. While this is great news if you're sick of the blowhard Marxist and Republican orators of the workers' or entrepreneurs' Coming Emancipation, it also leaves us very alone. On the one hand we now have a language to understand that every truth coming out of the mouth of our leaders, teachers, and specialists is suspect but on the other we are no longer presented with a Golden Brick Road towards the world of our desires.

The group who is best prepared to take advantage of this information is not the group with nothing to lose but the group with the most resources to bring to bear. If we are no longer interested in combining ourselves with others into shapes that can be placed on the board of politics and business, then those who do can have the board to themselves. They understand that the postmodern condition keeps us apart. Alone. They have trained us to believe in nothing *and* to accept the conditions of this world as universal.

The second premise builds on the first. If history is no longer a 'true' story (in the grand epic sense that Western Civilization classes or Marxists speak of), then progress is no longer that story extended into the future. If progress is no longer assumed on the world stage it may be that it wasn't the right mechanism (or meta-narrative) to understand the material world, humans' role in it, or much of anything at all. Where does that leave evolution? Isn't evolution just an idealist-materialist 'proof' of progress in biological systems?

If we abandon progressive notions then we should, it would stand to reason (sic), abandon inclinations toward democratic institution building (as a partial step towards what we want), including participation in humanizing such institutions. Instead we are informed by the specialists of knowledge, if we don't accept the progress modality, that we are at 'the end of history' where the present conditions are universal, fixed, and unconditional. This is another example of those

who control ideology planting their value system onto the space burnt out by the postmodern controlled fire.

Another premise of postmodernism is that culture is the means of social transformation in a media rich world. This is mostly a rhetorical device alluding to something obvious (if you accept the premise). If the world is indeed media rich, cybernetic, illusory, and entirely without mooring on the foundations of the 19th century, including 19th century prejudices about labor and progress, then engaging with it must be in this new vocabulary. If you do not accept this, if you recognize it as a tragic mis-reading of Debord, most of the consequences of thinking of culture-as—transformative-lever can be seen as based on a faulty premise.

This is how postmodernism works. It takes a premise, let's say that "Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (Debord) and turn it around "Representation is everything directly lived" and you have a clear argument for non-engagement. Why bother living in time and space? If life is merely representation then media is living on a greater scale than would be otherwise possible.

I recently attended a speech where one of the questions asked of the presenter, who was arguing against representation generally, went along these lines. "I am a computer graphics student and I have spent long days precisely measuring and evaluating a blade of grass with the goal of reproducing the form within the computer environment. How can you say that my work, both in the observing and the reproducing, is wrong?" This is a classic example of accepting the premise and basing, in this case, an entire career and life path on it. If we live in a media environment then oh, what a time savings that I myself do not have to go to a field to experience something called field. Instead I can download the Field Experience volume 1 and know field. Who are you to tell me differently? Do you have ownership of the concept of field that you would lord over me?

The point being made here is simply this: abandonment of understanding the mechanisms of control disarms us. In the case of postmodernism, confusing a set of academics with the actual power brokers who enact their ideas is a paralyzing problem.

What's next then? If there are no castle walls because domination has found a way to succeed without necessarily materializing, then our project no longer looks like a siege. If virtualization has become part and parcel of the dominance matrix then single points of attack are no longer effective. There is no letter bomb large enough.

The simple answer is that we have to be patient. We have to have an engaged patience that is incomprehensible to the lethargy of the revolutionary left. Our role should not be to lay in wait for some mark to come stumbling along because that is never going to happen. Instead we must have total engagement in the social and political processes around us. Nothing should escape our attention. This could look like, and is not limited to, attending church (especially politically active churches), going to shareholder meetings, attending city council, toasters, Elks lodges, civic organizations and even leftist meetings. The idea is not that our efforts should be particularly supportive or even destructive to these groups (although pushing the boundary in both directions should be part of the process) but to understand how it is that modern acculturated civil society works. What does a social group look like and how does it react to the kind of stimulus that can be brought to bear? If you play the game how easy is it to integrate into an organizational form? To what extent do these forms accrue power, negligence and momentum? We need more information.

Chapter 4: When all Dictionaries are burned, will we start over?

Active Nihilism

As foretold by Raul Vaneigem in Revolution of Everyday Life, "There is no consciousness of transcendence without consciousness of decomposition." The active nihilist sees in the unknown future and despair at our current situation, a call to arms. An active nihilist finds energy, a will to act, in the hopelessness of the conforming, rigid, asphyxiation of our society. Meaning is found in approaching the void rather than in the false knowledge of what is on the other side of it.

Terror

The primary modality of class society, whether it is by violence, hunger, or the threat of the elements. If every object, person, and moment is for sale, if there is nothing outside, then there is abject terror. When living is a contemptible act, it is terror. What is the opposite of this?

Nihilist Anarchism

We are not drifts of snow moving through reality. Things have happened. Choices have been made. These choices can be evaluated, not from a timeless doctrine but from a human scale. By this human scale the size, the scope, of the choices made is beyond comprehension. This being the case, and as the desire of conscious bodies is to understand, a frame of reference to begin to impact the world can be based on one of two options. Either shrink the world that you desire to understand and touch or assert yourself onto a world gone mad in such a way as to transform scale. Institutions, ideologies, systems, schools, family, capital, government and revolutionary movements have all developed beyond the body. Nihilist anarchism isn't concerned with a social revolution that adds a new chapter to an old history but the ending of history altogether. If not revolutionaries then possibly epochanaries, for the transformation of society without a positive program.

Philosophical Nihilism

The answer to the existential question about what is knowable is, nothing.

Passive Nihilism

If the future is unknowable we are confronted with a choice. When all we know is terror many stop making choices. People break. If you have ever been confronted by the alarm clock and just shut it off and pulled the cover over your head you know passive nihilism. The pain of resisting, of

being the false opposition, or the purged, justifies a thousand no's. A million. The passive nihilist no longer has hope that their participation is necessary for the world to keep spinning.

Life

Is a terrorized body living?

Power

Hyphenated power doesn't avoid the problem that power raises but tries to shift it somewhere else. We can, do, and will continue to hurt, dominate, and manipulate one another. We are creatures of power. To the extent that we do take responsibility for this it looks like shame. This confuses power with Christianity.

Hope

This coin has two sides that can't be separated: expectation and desire.

Existential Nihilism

An existential nihilist remains at an impasse regarding a variety of core issues. If we cannot know anything then how can we make choices? When Nietzsche talked of nihilism this is what he was referring to. The trajectory of Western thought leads to unknowable questions and paralysis.

Strategic Nihilism

Revolutionary programs deserve the snickers that they get. The idea that yet another manifesto (YAM) or mission statement or action plan is going to make the tired activism of a new generation smells less of the death it wraps around its neck is ludicrous. Strategic nihilism argues for a new approach to social transformation that resembles the burning of a field rather than building the new world within the shell of the old or one last push by the working class to seize the means of production. An approach that concerns itself with exactly what the forms of social control are and their suppression falls far astray from models of recruitment, education, progress, or the crossed fingers that the next riot will be the Big one.

Positive Program

Shorthand for a positive program for social change, a positive program is one that confuses desire with reality and extends that confusion into the future. In the case of radicals this usually takes the form of stating programs along the lines of "ATR there will be no hunger" at worst and "The abolishment of class society will result in relations without limit" at its best. A positive program is an idealist legacy that forms the core of most revolutionary thought.

Causality

The belief that one event following another necessitates their relationship is erroneous, as posited by Hume. If causality cannot be assumed, or even accepted if argued, the efficacy of most political forms is limited, particularly as a way to transform the world.

ATR

After the Revolution

Revolution

The limited desire to change the world as modeled by the French Revolution. The Good News: Heads will roll. The Bad: The Bureaucrats win in the end.

Body

A body can be an individual. It can be a group of individuals. It can be a cultural or social unit. It can also be understood as a philosophical unit, a black box that accepts input from the world and responds in kind. It is not known but knowing.

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Anarchy & Strategy

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Part I. Anarchist Strategy: A Reintroduction

Why are we concerned with anarchist strategy?

If strategy is the process of having priorities and subsequently acting on those priorities then an anarchist strategy names a discreet objective (in this case the establishment of an anarchist society upon the destruction of a capitalist and statist one) and sacrifices other priorities in the pursuit of that goal. An anarchist strategy is not a strategy about how to make a capitalist or statist society less authoritarian or spectacular. It assumes that we cannot have an anarchist society while the state or capitalism continues to reign.

> We are not for more freedom. More freedom is given to the slave when his chains are lengthened. We are for the abolition of the chain, so we are for freedom, not more freedom. Freedom means the absence of all chains, the absence of limits and all that ensues from such a statement. (Bonanno *The Anarchist Tension*)

It is important to inform our discussions about strategy in a clear vision about what exactly our strategic goals are. If we are incoherent on this point our efforts will suffer.

An anarchist strategy differs from a military strategy. Military strategy is the conduct of warfare. Warfare is a particular technological application of violence from states, or statist bodies, upon people; sometimes citizens of rival states, sometimes people in the way, and sometimes in the name of defending the very people it violates. It differs from other forms of confl ict that could and have occured in other contexts (economic, political, and technological). An anarchist strategy should understand more about military strategy than just the tactics of the Sierra Maestra guerillas, the movements of the armored columns against Rommel, or the Miami Model — while refusing to confuse the medium of warfare with strategic goals.

Social change does not always occur due to warfare, or violence, or the threat of either. Social change (throughout the past 10,000 years of human history) can be generally understood as happening through a) conquest, b) decline, c) the power of ideas, d) economics, e) the changing of the guard, or f) revolution. Revolution is the most recent addition to this list and doesn't have nearly the currency that those of us who were raised to believe in social change through direct action, protest, and petition believe that it does.

Because of the semiotic coding of the term "social change" within radical or revolutionary movements (embedding a meaning of such social change as being composed of entirely, or primarily, positive characteristics), examination of how societies (the various formations of humans throughout history) have changed becomes complicated. Change is not necessarily positive. Especially from a historical perspective it is probably more accurate to understand how most societies have changed, as being entirely negative. If we refer to the Eurasian exportation of values, systems, and technics upon the rest of the world we are not referring to choices made by the people of Oceania, the Americas, or Sub-Sarahan Africa in an egalitarian, or even well-informed, fashion. We are talking about imposition, warfare, genocide, and human bigotry in the most pure forms ever run rampant. We call this social change because it is, not because it is good.

Why do we use words like good, or bad, in relation to phenomena like social change? Do we understand the transformation of society from the drudgery of our industrial proletarian forebears to the happy communards we would like to become as happening through an evolutionary, or staggered, process of good things happening? If we understand history, whether strictly materialistic, sociological, or mythological, as being a series of bad events for good people and victories for bad people, are we limiting our own ability to accrue information that might actually allow us

to make more successful strategic choices than scaring off the cops for 12 hours in parts of Seattle? Does our inability to stop morally coding things limit our ability to make more interesting choices?

Why am I interested in anarchist strategy? Because I would like to be truly free. I would like to be free of rent and work and shitty microscopic sectarian politics. I would like to slow down and learn more about trees and walking and many of the people I blow by out of impatience. I have these desires in such abundance that I choose to devote my limited abilities and potential to understanding how things that I abhor work and things that I love thrive. An anarchist strategy is the body of ideas about how things (societies, people, structures) have changed, how people have changed them, and the practice of being that change.

Part II

Will we need an army?

Enough of the preliminaries — let's get down to brass tacks. Whenever the question of a total social transformation is raised, the accompanying concerns multiply during every breath taken in response. Anarchists have, by and large, rejected traditional models of Social Revolution *a la* France even as they have not rejected the imagery of the storming of the (metaphorical) Bastille. The question first and foremost would be how exactly would we deal with the military might that currently exists? Do anarchists need to raise an army to stand against the military might of today?

Means and Ends

Many, if not most, anarchists feel comfortable responding to the more general question of whether the ends justify the means by stating unequivocally that they do not. Since, given this statement, most scenarios of contestation against forces of repression are going to be under conditions of tension it is safe to assume that many of them will be under terms un-anarchistic. If the ends do not justify the means and the means are evaluated as the mechanisms by which conflict would be waged, this argument does not allow for vigorous conflict. War, by any definition but the most tortured, is not anarchist. Put another way, you cannot make revolution and keep your hands clean. Radical social transformation is, just about, the most authoritarian action ever undertaken. It is pretty hard to make an anarchist case to the contrary.

The two popular approaches today to this question hedge somewhat against this question. The Mass Movement model implies that the radical transformation of society through minority action of scale (whether it be labor groups or the dispossessed) would mitigate the authoritarian reality of imposing social transformation on a docile population. In practice this model uses the language of democracy, and internally democratic (also often representative) structures, to cloak its oppositional and political (as in partisan) nature. If there were a Mass Movement on the scale of even the American resistance to the Vietnam War our generation would see these things in practice. Instead we watch or participate as activists attempt to build a movement, with greater concern to its efficacy in-this-world and its size than in its potential structural and political constraints.

The people using the insurrectionary model argue that the decision to make a radical break will happen in a time of crisis and that our task is to encourage the conditions of this crisis. Additionally, they encourage, this corresponds well with anarchist principles like direct action, resisting the state, and "action without measure." If the action that anarchists take already corresponds to our desire, then the fact that it may not result in a radical break is of little consequence. The authoritarian aspects of this break will be shared with everyone who participates on the day-of-days and therefore doesn't have to be examined today.

The means and ends question (and particularly the way we answer it) prevents us from asking the hard questions about whether we are being honest with ourselves about either the implications of our personal and political practice or the consequences of those actions into the future.

Possibly the question of an anarchist army should be approached in reference to a few libertarian revolutionary moments. The Russian Revolution was not won with an army; the Bolsheviks filled a power vacuum created by the handling of the German war and missteps of the Provi-

sional Government. The army was only needed to defend the revolution. The Spanish Civil War was not fought by a specifically anarchist army but a coalition of Anarchists, Communists, and Democrats. The Paris Commune was inspired by the militias and rebelling army troops but not by force of arms against the population as much as reaction to the failure of the Franco-Prussian War.

If there is a lesson to draw here it is not so much that there is the need for an anarchist army but a need to be able to communicate with members of the military when morale is low. If the new film *Sir! No Sir!* reminds us of anything it is that members of the military are not unthinking automatons. This should be particularly clear after hearing the stories of the latest Gulf War when tens of thousands of Reserve soldiers gave up their daily lives. As we have forgotten the story of the rebellion within the Army in Vietnam we will not hear the story of the people who have rejected their orders to be stationed in Iraq.

Even if we were to reject the basic canon of modern anarchists that the ends do not justify the means we still would not advocate for an anarchist army. Social struggles of the past have not required such artificial contrivances, the exposure to the forces of repression that such an effort would cause would be incredible, and the paradigm of social conflict that such a question embeds is archaic. When struggle ensues next it will not look anything like redcoats lining up against bluecoats. It will likely not look like militias holding the line against the forces of counter-revolution. It will likely be a total surprise.

Next time we are going to develop more of the consequences of the means-and-ends conundrum. What use is talking about strategy if we are not willing to act in the world? Can we stand still on a moving train?

Part III

*I want to apologize for the terminology I am about to use. I believe that this information, on the militaristic approach to problem solving, is important information for those who are seen as the problems. In understanding this approach I have used militaristic language that converts humans and groups into units, squads, and platoons. This language is par for the course given their intentions but it is important to draw a clear distinction between their mentality, our education, and how we would want to apply this knowledge. I strongly discourage using their terms and methodology in contexts that we choose to involve ourselves with. **Naming is power.***

At the Our Lives Ahead conference this summer I attended an interesting workshop on Crowd Control & Street Tactics led by an ex-National Guardsman who had been through several sessions of (anti) protest training. This person led the room full of people through exercises that included marching, baton handling, formations, and an introduction to crowd control. It was interesting to see the reactions of the attendees to this education, to guess at what trainees experience during similar situations in the Guard, and see how the attendees transformed through the process of the techniques taught in the workshop. Additionally, the strategic implications of this workshop demand reflection.

What was not surprising, given the context of 1) video game culture, 2) the attendance of several boys around the age of 16–20 and 3) the presence of sections of PVC pipe serving as metaphorical batons, was the level of horseplay, phallic and weaponized. More surprising was exactly how quickly the group of baton-wielding humans turned into a scary, seemingly trained, group of crowd-controlling automatons. As an observer I could feel the terror of how easy it would be for these people to hurt me, how it would be possible for them to do it without compassion (as I was not part of the group), and how attractive being on the other side of this line was for the participants.

These were not bad people. They were goofy, young, activist types who wanted to understand the specifics of how they are terrorized by armored thugs when they go to protest events. However, the logic of formations and batons was far more powerful than the intentions of the people who participated in that training. The feeling of pushing other people around, and having group approval to do it, to have the stick instead of merely being right, was the lesson.

I have no doubt that the majority of the people who went through this training and experienced this will not become cops or automatons but will remember the power of simple techniques in controlling people. A lot of time and energy is spent by social scientists and military functionalists to come up with these techniques and they use several metrics to determine success. Are the techniques actually usable to achieve their primary goal? Do they achieve their secondary goals? Are the techniques trainable?

Regarding crowd control there can be several primary goals: containment, dispersal, and immobilization. The training that the NG uses (as demonstrated in the workshop cited above) focuses on formations, baton control, and technology to accomplish their primary goal. They are less interested in immobilization (and capture) than a police force would be. Secondary goals include maintaining unit morale, demonstration of force, and mobility. The implication of the question of morale is of much more concern with the NG than with the police because of their voluntary rather than professional status and the limitations of their training. Finally, and related to the first two issues, is the idea that while certain techniques may be more effective at tactical con-

tainment and dispersal, their training and implementation require professionalism that doesn't exist in the National Guard.

The bulk of the training in the workshop reflected what would be necessary in an NG unit. The formation training was simple but distilled the basic formation types in a brief period of time. The line formation is the classic crowd control formation with the unit, a squad of eight, facing the crowd in a single file line with squad leaders in a receded line. Three squads (in the context of NG) comprise a platoon.

The column formation is used to move a unit from one point to another. Other formations (the wedge or square) were also taught but their use, in a modern context, is related more to team building and hierarchal self-identification than to practical pursuits. The baton training was similarly simple and boiled down to two actions, using the baton to push a crowd and using the baton to hold and shape the line formation. Since the goal of the presentation, and the training generally, is to hold the line rather than to beat a crowd (we will get into the reasons for this in a minute) baton use is a strategic rather than a tactical consideration. It is more important that everyone is doing the same thing rather than anyone being particularly proficient — never mind skilled — in baton use.

This training is markedly different from police training in a number of regards. Police have a primary goal of immobilization leading to prosecution, which means that even in the context of the traditional line formation they have additional operational forces than the corresponding NG unit (although it is possible to imagine NG units using these special units in many situations). The linebackers (what we usually refer to as the snatch squad) have mobility behind and in front of the line and use cues to target and immobilize members (usually perceived leaders) of a crowd. They usually do not dress in uniform but are known to wear either some sort of marker (including visible badges, armbands, hats, etc) or use hand signals to pass through control lines. Many crowd control situations include several kinds of grenadiers using a variety of types of projectile weapons against crowds. These include, but are not limited to, tear gas canisters, projectile rubber batons, rubber bullets, beanbags, wooden dowels, tear gas projectiles (fired from paint ball guns with the same form factor), and water cannons.

An article from the FBI informs about police innovation in crowd control over the past decade. "Riot Response: An Innovative Approach" (1997) distills the lessons of the LA riots into a few simple lessons. This is a lesson you will not see applied in an NG context but only in one where the units are highly trained. Whereas the traditional line formation (the Skirmish Line) has made sense in a variety of contexts, it de-emphasizes mobility and flexibility in the interest of containment and dispersal. The FBI proposes the Augmented Skirmish Line, where squad-level units can act semi-autonomously (they are still directed by a platoon leader), thereby allowing for a greater degree of granularity in achieving primary goals. The second proposal is the creation of TANGO (Tactically Aggressive and Necessary Gambit of Options) squads. The TANGO squad is essentially a high tech snatch squad that waits behind police lines until deployed against so-called aggressive targets. "The Tango Team can bring to bear the entire spectrum of use-of-force options from command presence through deadly force — in a controlled, self-contained package."

Developing an understanding of the mentality and tactics of state-sponsored groups stands on its own as a worthwhile activity for anti-statists. The state's reliance on simple objectives and techniques to accomplish complicated tasks is a testament to the amount of human, intellectual effort that is put into these problems. The abandonment by the planners and participants in these activities of their own individuality and critical thought is but one horrible consequence.

Another is the complex and scientific examination of what works to disturb, terrify, and isolate individuals, done by the planning class and implemented by the participant class. These processes of social abandonment and social quantification are two mechanisms that anarchists can avoid in their own practice and in their understanding of how to engage with each other. Recognizing these traits in the state's behavior can allow some forewarning of the specifics of their intentions. Developing ideas on how to foil these processes should continue to inspire our activity.

Part IV. Unconventional War

Board games are immensely popular in Germany where some recent games are a genre unto themselves. German-style board games combine thoughtful play, some strategic elements, and enough randomness to make games competitive for different levels of players. They usually do not include elements like player elimination or complicated calculations. They tend toward themes rather than abstraction (think Risk rather than Chess). While some of these games have become popular in North America, the difference between the German family sitting at the dinner table playing a board game and an American family whose only time together is spent watching television speaks volumes about the difference between the two societies.

An interesting characteristic of German Games (GG) is the exploitation of different kinds of game processes, which makes a game more playable for more types of players — if not more satisfying. Competitive players, new players, and casual gamers can all enjoy German-style board games.

Recently I was at the home of a co-worker, where we played a highly modified version of Settlers of Cataan, the most popular GG in North America. These house rules softened most of the *hard* elements of the game (namely the elements that are competitive and aggressive) to make the game more pleasant for some of the players. The result is that the number of ways to win the game were drastically reduced, more time was spent setting up the pieces (the technics of the game) than actually playing it, and the lifespan of the game (the amount of time it would take to grow bored of it) was greatly reduced. Our hosts did not realize that it is the complexity-through-simplicity of Settlers of Cataan that makes it appealing, rather than the hard or soft elements of the game. These house rules apparently worked for my hosts but made the game, on the whole, less engaging to me and the other non-house players.

On the flipside of this kind of play, a small circle of us around town have taken to playing Settlers of Cataan with some regularity. Our games are, to put it gently, rough. Rough enough that people who are turned off by competitive environments steer clear of our games altogether and only a few types of personalities stick with the playing. The play itself is an odd combination of psychological conflict, harsh laughter, and the different personalities. Along with the boorish alpha males (among whom I count myself) are the pre-postal uptight white people, and the people who play to lose. The gaming becomes a microcosm of the political universe most of us have a desire to escape.

Those who refuse to play write off the whole practice as more-of-the-same and while they are *right*, their analysis raises a question. How do we break patterns, socialize, or engage in any project, if we don't do it with the full knowledge of who we are working with? How do they deal with pressure? How do they win and how do they lose?

What if, instead of judging the merits of an activity (like a board game) on its political palatability or how anarchist it is, we evaluate games on criteria like rule implementation, effective symbolism, and relation to life outside the game? Rather than focus on the correctness of a perspective or how it will play to the Lowest Common Denominator, we could focus on systemic flexibility. For example, if our goal is to have a pleasant evening, we first have to provide for chatty and competitive people; second, provide enough structure to give our evening a beginning, middle and an end; third, allow enough fluidity for everyone to feel included in each part of the evening and the game.

Warfare has heretofore entailed the strategic placement of material and actors. Resolution invariably reflected the amount of material placed, positional superiority, and/or the kind of

violence inflicted by the actors. The major conflicts of the twentieth century were of this type; one brutal violent machine pressing against another — grinding people in between.

The twenty-first century (especially if you start the 21st century immediately at the fall of the Berlin Wall) holds the possibility of transforming (a)social violence beyond all recognition. There will still be terror raining from the sky (at least until the fuel runs out) but the likelihood of another conflict where rival factions place nearly identical military units on a battlefield to slug it out for a hill or a city seems as quaint as lining up redcoats in the city square. It could still happen, but the past 20 years doesn't lead one to believe it will.

Birthrates, new holy wars (the Fedayeen vs. the Neo-Cons), food riots, fuel riots, and suicide bombing comprise modern elements to conflicts in this epoch. They aren't icons that can be placed on a battlefield by disinterested generals. *These are not vectors with one dimension. They are markers to a conflict in a multi-dimensional universe.* They represent forces that combine ideology and power in such measure as to defy (post)modernist categorization.

* * *

Anarchism has become *both* more like a game and more like non-traditional warfare since the twentieth century came to a close. On the one hand the goals of anarchism have become as varied as life in society. No longer are anarchists chained to the role of leftist partisans, givers-of-charity, martyrs, or villains. Anarchists can be book sellers, academics, carpenters, and a thousand other things. Anarchism, as a goal and a practice, is something that brings joy to the practitioners or is a habit to be shunned. Anarchists are either people we enjoy playing with or they should return to the gray.

On the other hand, the methods by which Capitalism and the State will be defeated (in North America at least) will not look like organizing the workplace, selling newspapers, or chanting the name of our fearless leader. It will probably not look like black masks and broken windows either, but it is likely there will be both. It is likely that if a near-total transformation is to happen, it will be by NTW (non-traditional warfare). It will be because of rioting, IEDs (improvised explosive devices), and un-mappable violence in the belly of the beast. It is likely to look like attack-by-all-means. It will look like raising children without aspirations toward the colonists, and without hope. It will, if it is to occur, look like the last gasps of a cultural regime that has run its course.

Our play today speaks, without comprehension, to this future. Knowing the futility of running into planted pikes, we resign ourselves to this play. But pikes are nothing but metal-capped staves.

Anarchy Without Road Maps or Adjectives

Aragorn!

Spring-Summer 2007

Most tendencies within anarchist circles have a narrow conception of what exactly makes an anarchist, what an anarchist project is, and what the transformation to an anarchist world will look like. Whether Green or Red, Communist or Individualist, Activist or Critical, Anarchists spend as much time defending their own speculative positions on these complicated issues as they do learning what others have to offer — especially other anarchists.

As a result many find that they would prefer to do their projects, political and social, outside of anarchist circles. Either they do not think their particular project is interesting to anarchists but believe it's important none the less (as in most progressive activism) or they do not particularly enjoy the company of anarchists and the kind of tension that working with anarchists entails. Both reasons are almost entirely accountable to the deep mistrust anarchists have of other anarchists' programs.

Once upon a time there was an anarchist call for "Anarchism without Adjectives," referring to a doctrine that tolerated the co-existence of different schools of anarchist thought. Instead of qualifying Anarchism as collectivist, communist, or individualist, Anarchism without Adjectives refused to preconceive economic solutions to a post-revolutionary time. Instead, Anarchism without Adjectives argued that the abolition of authority, not squabbling over the future, is of primary importance.

Today there are as many (if not more) divisions about what the abolition of authority should look like, as there were divisions on the question of the economic program for After the Revolution a hundred and twenty years ago. Anarchist activists ("organizers") believe that a power-from-below will abolish authority. Class-struggle anarchists believe that the working class will end the authority of capitalist society. Collapsists believe that economic and environmental conditions will inevitably lead to social transformation and an end to authority.

Then again, many anarchists do not believe that the abolition of authority is of primary importance for anarchists at all. Their arguments are that authority cannot be simply understood (it is both capitalism and the state and neither of these). That anarchists do not have the (political, social, people or material) power to bring about this abolition, and that authority has transformed itself into something far more diffuse than the kings and monopolists of the 19$^{\text{th}}$ century. If authority can best be understood as a spectacle, today, then it is both diffuse and concentrated. This flexibility on the part of spectacular society has resulted in the effort for the abolition of

authority (and the practice of many anarchists), for its own sake, to be perceived as utopian and (spectacularly) ridiculous.

Anarchists of all stripes agree that the revolutionary programs of the past have fallen far short of the total liberation of the oppressed. Leftists believe that the programs were likely to have been right but that the timing and conditions were wrong. Many other anarchists believe that the time for Programs is over. These perspectives are represented in the history of anarchism and are the source of endless contention in the founding of and meetings of anarchist groups.

History should be used to provide the context of these differing perspectives but is, instead, seen as providing evidence for one or another. Instead of trying to understand one another, to communicate, we seem to use the opportunity of our lack of success to fix our positions and argue for decreasing returns.

If anarchy does not have a road map then we (as anarchists) are free to work together. Our projects might not be of the same scale as the general strike, or even the halting of business-as-usual in a major metropolitan area, but they would be anarchist projects. An anarchy without road map or adjectives could be one where the context of the decisions that we make together will be of our own creation rather than imposed upon us. It could be an anarchy of now rather than the hope of another day. It would place the burden of establishing trust on those who actually have a common political goal (the abolition of the state and capitalism) rather than on those who have no goal at all or whose goal is antithetical to an anarchist one.

An anarchy without road map or adjectives does not ignore difference but instead places it in the context that it belongs in. When we are faced with a moment of extreme tension, when everything that we know appears about to change, then we may choose different forks in the road. Until that time anarchists should approach each other with the naïvete that we approach the world with. If we believe that the world can change and could change in a radical direction from the one traveled the past several thousand years then we should have some trust in others who desire the same things.

Locating An Indigenous Anarchism

Aragorn!

2005

Contents

It's easy enough to hedge about politics. It comes naturally and most of the time the straight answer isn't really going to satisfy the questioner, nor is it appropriate to fix our politics to this world, to what feels immovable. Politics, like experience, is a subjective way to understand the world. At best it provides a deeper vocabulary than mealy-mouthed platitudes about being good to people, at worst (and most commonly) it frames people and ideas into ideology. Ideology, as we are fully aware, is a bad thing. Why? Because it answers questions better left haunting us, because it attempts to answer permanently what is temporary at best.

It is easy to be cagey about politics but for a moment let us imagine a possibility. Not to tell one another what to do, or about an answer to every question that could arise, but to take a break from hesitation. Let us imagine what an indigenous anarchism could look like.

We should start with what we have, which is not a lot. What we have, in this world, is the memory of a past obscured by history books, of a place clear-cut, planted upon, and paved over. We share this memory with our extended family, who we quarrel with, who we care for deeply, and who often believe in those things we do not have. What we do have is not enough to shape this world, but is usually enough to get us by.

If we were to shape this world (an opportunity we would surely reject if we were offered), we would begin with a great burning. We would likely begin in the cities where with all the wooden structures of power and underbrush of institutional assumption the fire would surely burn brightly and for a very long time. It would be hard on those species that lived in these places. It would be very hard to remember what living was like without relying on deadfall and fire departments. But we would remember. That remembering wouldn't look like a skill-share or an extension class in the methods of survival, but an awareness that no matter how skilled we personally are (or perceive ourselves to be) we need our extended family.

We will need each other to make sure that the flames, if they were to come, clear the area that we will live in together. We will need to clear it of the fuel that would end up repeating the problems we are currently having. We will need to make sure that the seeds, nutrients and soil are scattered beyond our ability to control.

Once we get beyond the flames we will have to craft a life together. We will have to recall what social behavior looks and feels like. We will have to heal.

When we begin to examine what life could be like, now that all the excuses are gone, now that all the bullies are of human size and shape, we will have to keep in mind many things. We will have to always keep in mind the matter of scale. We will have to keep in mind the memory of the first people and the people who kept the memory of matches and where and when to burn through the past confusing age. For what it is worth we will have to establish a way to live that is both indigenous, which is to say of the land that we are actually on, and anarchist, which is to say without authoritarian constraint.

First Principles

First principles are those perspectives that (adherents to) a tendency would understand as immutable. They are usually left unstated. Within anarchism these principles include direct action, mutual aid, and voluntary cooperation. These are not ideas about how we are going to transform society or about the form of anarchist organization, but an understanding about what would

be innovative and qualitatively different about an anarchist social practice vis-à-vis a capitalist republic, or a totalitarian socialism.

It is worth noting a cultural history of our three basic anarchist principles as a way of understanding what an indigenous anarchist set of principles could look like. Direct action as a principle is primarily differentiated from the tradition of labor struggles, where it was used as a tactic, in that it posits that living 'directly' (or in an unmediated fashion) is an anarchist imperative. Put another way, the principle of direct action would be an anarchist statement of self-determination in practical aspects of life. Direct action must be understood through the lens of the events of May '68 where a rejection of alienated life led large sections of French society into the streets and towards a radically self-organized practice.

The principle of mutual aid is a very traditional anarchist concept. Peter Kropotkin laid out a scientific analysis of animal survival and (as a corollary to Darwin's theory of evolution) described a theory of cooperation that he felt better suited most species. As one of the fathers of anarchism (and particularly Anarcho-Communism) Kropotkin's concept of mutual aid has been embraced by most anarchists. As a principle it is generally limited to a level of tacit anarchist support for anarchist projects.

Voluntary cooperation is the anarchist principle that informs anarchist understandings of economics, social behavior (and exclusion), and the scale of future society. It could be stated simply as the principle that we, individually, should determine what we do with our time, with whom we work, and how we work. Anarchists have wrestled with these concepts for as long as there has been a discernible anarchist practice. The spectrum of anarchist thought on the nuance of voluntary cooperation ranges from Max Stirner who refuses anything but total autonomy to Kropotkin whose theory of a world without scarcity (which is a fundamental premise of most Marxist positions) would give us greater choices about what we would do with our time. Today this principle is usually stated most clearly as the principle to freely associate (and disassociate) with one another.

This should provide us with enough information to make the simple statement that anarchist principles have been informed by science (both social and physical), a particular understanding of the individual (and their relation to larger bodies) and as a response to the alienation of modern existence and the mechanisms that social institutions use to manipulate people. Naturally we will now move onto how an indigenous perspective differs from these.

In the spirit of speaking clearly I hesitate in making the usual caveats when principles are in question. These hesitations are not because, in practice, there is any doubt as to what the nature of relationship or practice should look like. But when writing, particularly about politics, you can do yourself a great disservice by planting a flag and calling it righteous. Stating principles as the basis for a politic usually is such a flag. If I believe in a value and then articulate that value as instrumental for an appropriate practice then what is the difference between my completely subjective (or self-serving) perspective and one that I could possibly share usefully? This question should continue to haunt us.

Since we have gone this far let us speak, for a moment, about an indigenous anarchism's first principles. Insert caveats about this being one perspective among many. Everything is alive. Alive may not be the best word for what is being talked about but we could say imbided with spirit or filled with the Great Spirit and we would mean the same thing. We will assume that a secular audience understands life as complex, interesting, in motion, and valuable. This same secular person may not see the Great Spirit in things that they are capable of seeing life in.

The counterpoint to everything being filled with life is that there are no dead things. Nothing is an object. Anything worth directly experiencing is worth acknowledging and appreciating for its complexity, its dynamism and its intrinsic worth. When one passes from what we call life, they do not become object, they enrich the lives they touched and the earth they lie in. If everything is alive, then sociology, politics, and statistics all have to be destroyed if for no other reason but because they are anti-life disciplines.

Another first principle would be that of the ascendance of memory. Living in a world where complex artifices are built on foundations of lies leads us to believe that there is nothing but deceit and untruth. Our experience would lead us to believe nothing less. Compounding this problem is the fact that those who could tell us the truth, our teachers, our newscasters and our media devote a scarce amount of their resources to anything like honesty. It is hard to blame them. Their memory comes from the same forgetfulness that ours does.

If we were to remember we would spend a far greater amount of our time remembering. We would share our memories with those we loved, with those we visited, and those who passed by us. We will have to spend a lot of time creating new memories to properly place the recollection of a frustrated forgetful world whose gift was to destroy everything dissimilar to itself.

An indigenous anarchism is an anarchism of place. This would seem impossible in a world that has taken upon itself the task of placing us nowhere. A world that places us nowhere universally. Even where we are born, live, and die is not our home. An anarchism of place could look like living in one area for all of your life. It could look like living only in areas that are heavily wooded, that are near life-sustaining bodies of water, or in dry places. It could look like traveling through these areas. It could look like traveling every year as conditions, or desire, dictated. It could look like many things from the outside, but it would be choice dictated by the subjective experience of those living in place and not the exigency of economic or political priorities. Location is the differentiation that is crushed by the mortar of urbanization and pestle of mass culture into the paste of modern alienation.

Finally an indigenous anarchism places us as an irremovable part of an extended family. This is an extension of the idea that everything is alive and therefore we are related to it in the sense that we too are alive. It is also a statement of a clear priority. The connection between living things, which we would shorthand to calling family, is the way that we understand ourselves in the world. We are part of a family and we know ourselves through family. Leaving aside the secular language for a moment, it is impossible to understand oneself or one another outside of the spirit. It is the mystery that should remain outside of language that is what we all share together and that sharing is living.

Anarchist in spirit vs. Anarchist in word

Indigenous people in general and North American native people specifically have not taken too kindly to the term anarchist up until this point. There have been a few notable exceptions (Rob los Ricos, Zig Zag, and myself among them) but the general take is exemplified by Ward Churchill's line "I share many anarchist values like opposition to the State but…" Which begs the question why aren't more native people interested in anarchism?

The most obvious answer to this question is that anarchism is part of a European tradition so far outside of the mainstream that it isn't generally interesting (or accessible) to non-westerners.

This is largely true but is only part of the answer. Another part of an answer can be seen in the surprisingly large percentage of anarchists who hold that race doesn't matter; that it is, at best, a tool used to divide us (by the Man) and at worst something that will devolve society into tribalism [sic]. Outside of whether there are any merits to these arguments (which I believe stand by themselves) is the violation of two principles that have not been discussed in detail up until this point — self-determination and radical decentralization.

Self-determination should be read as the desire for people who are self-organized (whether by tradition, individual choice, or inclination) to decide how they want to live with each other. This may seem like common sense, and it is, but it is also consistently violated by people who believe that their value system supersedes that of those around them. The question that anarchists of all stripes have to answer for themselves is whether they are capable of dealing with the consequences of other people living in ways they find reprehensible.

Radical decentralization is a probable outcome to most anarchist positions. There are very few anarchists (outside of Parecon) that believe that an anarchist society will have singular answers to politics, economy, or culture. More than a consequence, the principle of radical decentralization means it is preferable for there to be no center.

If anarchists are not able to apply the principles of self-determination to the fact that real living and breathing people do identify within racial and cultural categories and that this identification has consequences in terms of dealing with one another can we be shocked that native people (or so-called people of color) lack any interest in cohabitating? Furthermore if anarchists are unable to see that the consequence of their own politic includes the creation of social norms and cultures that they would not feel comfortable in, in a truly decentralized social environment, what hope do they have to deal with the people with whom they don't feel comfortable today?

The answer is that these anarchists do not expect to deal with anyone outside of their understanding of reality. They expect reality to conform to their subjective understanding of it.

This problem extends to the third reason that native people lack interest in anarchism. Like most political tendencies anarchism has come up with a distinct language, cadence, and set of priorities. The tradition of these distinctions is what continues to bridge the gap between many of the anarchist factions that have very little else in common. This tradition is not a recruiting tradition. There is only a small evangelical tradition within anarchism. It is largely an inscrutable tradition outside of itself.

This isn't a problem outside of itself. The problem is that it is coupled with the arrogance of the educated along with the worst of radical politics' excesses. This is best seen in the distinction that continues to be made of a discrete tradition of anarchism from actions that are anarchistic. Anarchists would like to have it both ways. They would like to see their tradition as being both a growing and vital one along with being uncompromising and deeply radical. Since an anarchist society would be such a break from what we experience in this world, it would be truly different. It is impossible to perceive any scenario that leads from here to there. There is no path.

The anarchist analysis of the Zapatistas is a case in point. Anarchists have understood that it was an indigenous struggle, that it was armed and decentralized but habitually temper their enthusiasm with warnings about a) valorizing Subcommandante Marcos, b) the differences between social democracy and anarchism, c) the problems with negotiating with the State for reforms, etc. etc. These points are valid and criticism is not particularly the problem. What is the problem is that anarchist criticism is generally more repetitive than it is inspired or influential. Repetitive criticisms are useful in getting every member of a political tendency on the same page. Criticism

helps us understand the difference between illusion and reality. But the form that anarchist criticism has taken about events in the world is more useful in shaping an understanding of what real anarchists believe than what the world is.

As long as the arbiters of anarchism continue to be the wielders of the Most Appropriate Critique, then anarchism will continue to be an isolated sect far removed from any particularly anarchistic events that happen in the world. This will continue to make the tendency irrelevant for those people who are interested in participating in anarchistic events.

Native People are not gone

For many readers these ideas may seem worth pursuit. An indigenous anarchism may state a position felt but not articulated about how to live with one another, how to live in the world and about the decomposition. These readers will recognize themselves in indigeneity and ponder the next step. A radical position must embed an action plan, right?

No, it does not.

This causality, this linear vision of the progress of human events from idea to articulation to strategy to victory is but one way to understand the story of how we got from there to here. Progress is but one mythology. Another is that the will to power, or the spirit of resistance, or the movement of the masses transforms society. They may, and I appreciate those stories, but I will not finish this story with a happy ending that will not come true. This is but a sharing. This is a dream I have had for some time and haven't shown to any of you before, which is not to say that I do not have a purpose...

Whether stated in the same language or not, the only indigenous anarchists that I have met (with one or three possible exceptions) have been native people. This is not because living with these principles is impossible for non-native people but because there are very few teachers and even fewer students. If learning how to live with these values is worth anything it is worth making the compromises necessary to learn how people have been living with them for thousands of years.

Contrary to popular belief, the last hope for native values or an indigenous world-view is not the good hearted people of civilized society. It is not more casinos or a more liberal Bureau of Indian Affairs. It is not the election of Russell Means to the presidency of the Oglala Sioux Tribe. It is patience. As I was told time and time again as a child "The reason that I sit here and drink is because I am waiting for the white man to finish his business. And when he is done we will return."

Aragorn!
Locating An Indigenous Anarchism
2005

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Nihilism, Anarchy, and the 21ˢᵗ century

Aragorn!

Contents

Introduction

This pamphlet about nihilism is intended for an anarchist audience. Throughout the course of compiling this there was a certain temptation to preface sentence after sentence with 'From an anarchist perspective' or 'As an anarchist' because my evaluation of this subject material comes from an anarchist orientation. I resisted making such a pedantic statement over and over again within these pages but I would remind the reader that the assumption holds.

A few notes about the narrative arc that I intend here. My intention is to expose anarchists (who might not be otherwise) to the breadth of the nihilist contribution. I have gone further afield than I generally would. Normally I would be satisfied providing threads that an engaged reader could follow on their own without making the connections that seem obvious to me. I generally see my writing as living within the context that it does and therefore do not spend a lot of time explaining why I have arrived where I have.

Herein I have made different choices. I begin with a lengthy discussion about the history of nihilism. I am not a particular fan of the facts, names, and dates that makes a useful history, but made an exception in this case because I believe that the information should be accessible to more people than just those who are willing to slog through the many books on the subject that I have. With that said, I have made many errors of omission. If I ever do decide to write a book on history, it may very well be on nihilism, because the amount that I left out of this brief history still weighs on my mind.

I then provide some thoughts on the connection, or lack of connection, of nihilism to the socialist tradition. I will say, even though I will regret saying it later, that part of my intention is to approach certain topics with a stronger language than the current left or not-left discourse. I make the issue about socialism. I have included a previously published essay that makes a first pass at drawing out connections between nihilism and action in-this-world that may be useful to those eager to develop conclusions along these lines in real-time. Finally I have included a recent rant that will serve as an exclamation point to this pamphlet and a comma to our discussion about nihilism and anarchy.

Aragorn!

Chapter 1: A History of Russian Nihilism

An understanding of the Russian nihilism of the 1860s begins with an attempt to understand the concept of nihilism. This is naturally difficult because if there is a word that has even more loaded, and negative, connotations than anarchism it would be nihilism. This is particularly because the primary vehicle of our modern understanding of nihilism is through the fiction of Turgenev and Dostoevsky. Neither of these authors were particularly sympathetic to nihilism and provided nihilist characters primarily as a frame with which to drape their morality tales. The version of nihilism offered by these authors is then, primarily, a snapshot of the popular culture in which nihilism dwelt as much as it is a recollection of the trend. This time in Russian history is part of the story of nihilism and will be part of the story in bridging the gap between the mythological Bazarov, Verkhovensky, or Raskolnikov and figures like Nicholas Chernyshevsky, Dmitry Pisarev, and to some extent Sergey Nechayev.

What then was nihilism? Nihilism was a youth movement, a philosophical tendency, and a revolutionary impulse. Nihilism was the valorization of the natural sciences. Nihilism was a specific fashion style. Nihilism was a new approach to aesthetics, criticism and ethics. Nihilism was the contradiction between a studied materialism and the desire to annihilate the social order. Nihilism was also a particularly Russian response to the conditions of Tsarist reform and repression. Nihilism has become much more than it originally would have been capable of because of the viral nature of its value-system, practice, and conclusions. Nihilism's effect is traceable through the history of Anarchism, through the formation and modern practice of terrorism, and through philosophical trends from deconstruction to existentialism.

Russia in the mid nineteenth century was a place of increasing tension. The revolution of 1848 that touched most of the European continent did not drastically affect Russia. As a result of the Russian campaign to subdue Napoleon (1812–1815) western ideas were brought to Russia. These ideas most clearly articulated themselves as a desire for a constitution defending values like human rights, a representative government, and democracy. When the Tsar (Alexander I) died in 1825 a regiment of soldiers refused to pay allegiance to the new crown, wanting instead the establishment of a Russian constitution. These westernized Russians were particularly frustrated because the colony of Poland was awarded a constitution by the Tsar. The 'Decembrists,' as they were called, were suppressed and remained a symbol of the possibility of social change throughout the century. Alexander's successor, his brother Nicholas I, was an autocrat. He ruled Russia (1825–1855) with a combination of secret police (the Third Section), censorship, nationalism, and colonialism. After the failure in the Crimean war against the combined might of the Ottoman Empire, Britain, and France, Russia was in the dire situation of being forced to make major reforms or no longer be considered a player on the European continent. The timing of this military failure by Russia coincided with the death of Nicholas I.

His son, Alexander II, assumed the throne (1855–1881). His reign began with the negotiation of a peace deal with the major powers of Europe and a major domestic reform. Alexander II, in the sixth year of his reign, freed the peasants. This meant that as a class the peasants became "trans-

formed into a class of independent communal proprietors" which meant that they had rights far beyond any other peasantry in Europe. This reform was coupled with changes to the military, judiciary, and local self-governance. This spirit of change was dampened by the comparison of the transformations not to the past, but to a mythological state. This sets the stage for nihilism.

The New People, as they were called, existed before the publishing of the book *Fathers and Sons* (1862) by Turgenev but found a hero in the character of Bazarov. It is worth noting the role of literature in Russian culture. Prose rose to prominence in the 1840s as the rise in publications of literary journals that printed novels in serial. This form affected Russian culture so dramatically that Alexander's emancipation of the peasants is attributed, in part, to his reaction to Ivan Turgenev's collection of *Sportsman's Sketches* that depicted the life of the peasant. Literature was a respected form of social commentary that broached issues from the generation gap (in *Fathers and Sons*) to the psychology of men and women under great duress (Dostoyevsky) and in daily life (Tolstoy). This style of literature became known as realism due to its unflinching portrayal of contemporary life. The realist novel portrayed the experience of what was happening in Russian culture and in the 1860s that was nihilism.

Foundational Nihilism

Russian nihilism can be dissected, perhaps unnaturally, into two periods. The foundational period (1860–1869) where the 'counter-cultural' aspects of nihilism scandalized Russia, where even the smallest of indiscretions resulted in nihilists being sent to Siberia or imprisoned for lengthy periods of time, and where the philosophy of nihilism was formed. The other period would be the revolutionary period of Nihilism (1870–1881) when the pamphlet *The Catechism of a Revolutionist* inspired the movement-in-waiting into a movement-with-teeth with dozens of actions against the Russian state. The revolutionary period ends, of course, with the assassination of the Tsar Alexander II (March 13th, 1881), by a series of bombs, and the consequential crushing of the nihilist movement.

It is arguable that Mikhail Bakunin's (1814–1876) "Reaction in Germany" (1842) with its famous dictum "Let us therefore trust the eternal Spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unfathomable and eternal source of all life. The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!" both anticipated and instigated the ideas of the nihilists. Bakunin was considered, in Russia, a Westernizer because of his influences by the thinkers of the day from the Continent proper. In "Reaction" Bakunin engaged with the Hegelian view by asserting that the negative, and not the positive, is the creative driving force of dialectics. While he is inexorably linked to both the foundational and revolutionary periods of nihilism, Bakunin was a product of the earlier generation whose vision, ultimately, was not the same as the nihilist view. He stated this best as "I am a free man only so far as I recognize the humanity and liberty of all men around me. In respecting their humanity, I respect my own." This general humanitarian instinct is in contrast to the nihilist proclamations of having a "hate with a great and holy hatred" or calling for the "annihilation of aesthetics" (Pisarev).

Nihilism was never a singular, or even a particularly disciplined, body of thought. This is attributable to the reality a) that the main nihilist philosophers (Chernyshevsky and Pisarev) never held academic positions, b) that publishing was heavily censored under the Tsar or, as is most likely, c) of the nature of nihilism itself. Nihilism never had enough momentum, enough time, or

the right conditions to become a mature philosophy. This resulted in it being an approximation to a body of ideas rather than a body of ideas. While strong positions were taken along several theoretical lines, none were developed in the generational method necessary for these ideas to hold historical purchase. While natural science was seen as the most potent intellectual tool, more nihilist commentary was made in the field of aesthetics, this being related to the obscurity principle. The obscurity principle says that in times of repression the most cogent social commentary happens in the vehicle of fiction, where your intention is 'obscured' because you appear to be talking about something entirely different than you are. In the case of the nihilists, art was anathema because it aggregated sentimentalism, emotionalism, irrationalism, spiritualism, and was a waste of resources. This obscured the fact that nihilists were actually talking about the values of the current order embedded in the vehicle of art but this connection couldn't be made more clearly in a context of censorship.

As a positive philosophy Nihilism took positions within the framework of established philosophy. Nihilist materialism boiled down to the view that "only what is perceptible exists". Man, then, was "a complex chemical compound, governed strictly by the law of causality." Ethics, as argued by Chernyshevsky and Pisarev, can be described as the 'scientific' justification for hedonism. The nihilist position on epistemology was realist and contrary to the phenomenalism of the time. Art was valuable in direct relationship to its 'social usefulness', however that is defined (which it was not). As these positions reflect, Nihilism was not at its strongest as a positive philosophy and due to the transformation of Nihilism from a position to an action there was never a particularly focused development of these ideas.

As a matter of course, nihilism became a more coherent position only in banned texts, smuggled into Russia from émigrés. The most prolific of these émigré's was Alexander Herzen (1812–1870) who established the Free Russian Press in London where he published until his death. The Press was well known for its publications of radical literature that ranged from To the Younger Generation (1861), that argued for the replacement of the Tsar by an employee of the state, to the journals *The Polar Star* and *Voices from Russia*. His most well known journal was *The Bell* which was smuggled into Russia where it was quite popular through the foundational nihilist period by those who desired social reform. In hindsight his views were rather conservative, especially in light of what nihilism would become. From *The Bell* in 1865, "Social progress is possible only under complete republican freedom, under full democratic equality."

It is as a political position that nihilism attracted attention and was transformed from a discussion between learned men into a social movement. Nihilist politics begin as a branch of the Socialist tree. They were most influenced by the French Socialism of the time, Charles Fourier (1772–1837), Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872), Auguste Comte (1798–1857), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), and obscure German materialists (Buchner, Moleschott, and Vogt). The nihilist contribution to socialism in general was the concept that the peasant was an agent of social change (Chernyshevsky, A Criticism of Philosophical Prejudices Against the Obshchina (1858)), and not just the bourgeois reformers of the revolutions of 1848, or the proletariat of Marx (a concept that wouldn't reach Russia until later). Agitation for this position landed Chernyshevsky in prison and exile in Siberia for the next 25 years (although the specific accusations with which he was convicted were a concoction) in 1864. The first group, inspired by nihilist ideas, to form and work towards social change, did so as a secret society and were called *Land and Freedom*. This groups name was also taken by another, entirely separate group, during the Revolutionary Nihilist period. The first *Land and Freedom* conspired to support the Polish independence movement and to agitate the

peasants who were burdened with debt as a result of the crippling redemption payments required by the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Polish independence was not of particular interest to the nihilists, and after a plot to incite Kazan peasants to revolt failed, *Land and Freedom* folded (1863).

Thus begins the first period of nihilist secret societies. *The Organization* created a boy's school in a Moscow slum in order to train revolutionaries. In addition they had a secret sub-group called *Hell* whose purpose was political terrorism, with the assassination of the Tsar as the ultimate goal. This resulted in the failed attempt by Dmitry Karakozov on the 4th of April 1866. Dmitry fired a revolver, but had his arm jostled by an artisan (who died, before the potential assassin, of the excesses of drink as a result of his change of social status) at the last minute. Dmitry was tried and hanged at Smolensk Field in St Petersburg. The leader of *The Organization*, Nicholas Ishutin, was also tried and was to be executed before being exiled to Siberia for life. Thus ended *The Organization* and began the White Terror of the rest of the 1860s.

The White Terror began by the Tsar putting Count Michael Muravyov ('Hanger Muravyov' due to his treatment of Polish rebels in prior years) in charge of the suppression of the nihilists. The two leading radical journals (*The Contemporary and Russian Word*) were banned, liberal reforms were minimized by reactionary afterthoughts, and the educational system was reformed to stifle the revolutionary spirit that lived there. This action by the Russian state marks the end of the foundational period of nihilism.

The lifestyle of the nihilist, or New People, is worth reviewing, if for no other reason, because of its similarity to youth movements of the modern era. While advocating for a callous hedonism and radical subjectivity, in practice nihilists actually tended towards a utilitarian and ascetic lifestyle. The fashion is a case in point. "Both sexes favoured blue-tinted spectacles and high boots. Other common features were a heavy walking-stick and a rug flung over the shoulders in cold weather; they called it a plaid, but it was not necessarily a tartan." (Hingley) This, coupled with huge beards for men and bobs for women, a voracious appetite for cigarettes, an unwashed dirty appearance, and rude and outspoken behavior made the New People a sight to behold. The nihilists attempted to challenge the values of the day in a more meaningful way too. At the time, the question of woman's emancipation was of great interest to reformers. For the nihilist the issues were regarding work and sexual freedom. Because a woman's passport (which was used for general travel and not just travel abroad) was legally controlled by men — a father, or husband, had ultimate control of a woman's life. The nihilists solved this problem by having 'fictitious' marriages. This allowed for an emancipation of women de jure if not de facto. This resulted in women having the freedom of mobility to pursue some academic pursuits (which were curtailed during the White Terror) and some enterprise. Finally, the nihilists adopted the credo that adultery was a natural, and even desirable trait, in contrast to the spirit of their time, or their own cultural composition (i.e. they were prudes).

More influential for the New People than philosophy, or political texts, was literature. The expression of the tension between generations by Bazarov in *Father's and Sons* as the rejection of the romantic and idealistic postures, guaranteed his position as an icon of the nihilist movement. This was even though Turgenev's intention was to portray the New People in a less than flattering light. The publication of Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* (1863), which was written in prison, became the guiding light to the movement. Within its pages was a vision of the socialist values of the nihilist, an exposition of how to live with radical values intact, and how to practice nihilist non-monogamy. The power of literature on the movement is ironic because, of course,

most of our modern understanding of the nihilist movement comes from the novels of Turgenev and Dostoyevsky. While Turgenev was non-judgmental in his depiction of the New People (and respected by the nihilists, Chernyshevsky having held correspondence with him), Dostoyevsky was in violent reaction to them. While Dostoyevsky was involved in radical activity against the Tsar in the 1840's, during his exile in Siberia he became a Orthodox Christian, upon his return he became quite upset at nihilism in general and Chernyshevsky specifically. The last five novels of Dostoyevsky dealt with nihilism to some degree either centrally or as a major theme.

Revolutionary Nihilism

The entrance on the scene of one person symbolizes the transformation from the foundational period to the revolutionary period. Sergei Nechaev, the son of a serf (which was unusual as most nihilists came from a slightly higher social class, what we would call lower middle class), desired an escalation of the discourse on social transformation. Nechaev argued that just as the European monarchies used the ideas of Machiavelli, and the Catholic Jesuits practiced absolute immorality to achieve their ends, there was no action that could not be also used for the sake of the people's revolution. "His apparent immorality [more an amorality] derived from the cold realization that both Church and State are ruthlessly immoral in their pursuit of total control. The struggle against such powers must therefore be carried out by any means necessary." (Cleaver) Nechaev's social cache was greatly increased by his association with Bakunin in 1869 and extraction of funds from the Bakhmetiev Fund for Russian revolutionary propaganda.

The image of Nechaev is as much a result of his *Catechism of a Revolutionist*(1869) as any actions he actually took in life. The *Catechism* is an important document as it establishes the clear break between the formation of nihilism as a political philosophy and what it becomes as a practice of revolutionary action. It documents the Revolutionary as a very transformed figure from the nihilist of the past decade. Whereas the nihilist may have practiced asceticism, they argued for an uninhibited hedonism. Nechaev argued that the Revolutionary, by definition, must live devoted to one aim and not allow for distractions of desire, compassion, or feelings. Friendship was contingent on Revolutionary fervor, relationships with strangers was quantified in terms of what resources they offered revolution, and everyone had a role during the revolutionary moment that boiled down to how soon they would be lined up against the wall or when they would accept that they had to do the shooting. The uncompromising tone and content of the Catechism was influential far beyond the character of Nechaev. Part of the reason for this is because of the way in which it extended nihilist principles into a revolutionary program. The rest of the reason was that it gave the revolutionary project a macho weightiness that the men 'of the sixties' did not.

In terms of what the Catechism offered nihilism, a quote:

"By 'revolution,' our Organization does not mean a regulated pattern in the classical, western sense, a movement that always stops and bows with respect before private property rights and before traditions of public order and so-called civilization and morality — one which until now has limited itself to overthrowing one political form to replace it with another that tried to create a so-called revolutionary-state. The only revolution that could be beneficial for the people would be that revolution which destroyed at its roots any elements of the state and which would

exterminate all the state traditions, social order, and classes in Russia." (Thesis 23, *Catechism of the Revolutionary*)

Nechaev appears to be attempting to bridge the gap between Machiavelli and a nihilistic anarchism in this thesis. Which, beyond anarchist hand-wringing to the contrary, is a sobering take on what horrors may be necessary for the abolition of the standing order.

Which is not to say that there is much to reclaim from the personality of Nechaev in general. The facts are clear. Nechaev imagined a secret revolutionary organization *the Russian Revolutionary Committee*, with himself as the fugitive member from which he was taking refuge in Geneva, where he met Bakunin. Bakunin, an admirer of Nechaev's zeal and stories of his organization's success, provided contacts and resources to send Nechaev back to Russia as his representative (he gave him the number 2771) of the *Russian Section of the World Revolutionary Alliance* (also an imaginary organization). Upon his return to Russia Nechaev formed the secret, cell based organization, *People's Vengeance*. One student member of the organization Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov questioned the very existence of the *Secret Revolutionary Committee* that Nechaev claimed to be the representative of. This honest appraisal of Nechaev's modus operanti required action. "On the evening of 21 November 1869 the victim was accordingly lured to the premises of the Moscow School of Agriculture, a hotbed of revolutionary sentiment, where Nechayev did him to death by shooting and strangulation, assisted without great enthusiasm by three dupes... Nechayev's accomplices were arrested and tried." (Hingley) Upon his return to Switzerland Nechaev was rejected by Bakunin (for most of the obvious reasons) and was eventually extradited back to Russia where he spent the remainder of his life at the Peter and Paul Fortress. He did, due to his charisma and force of will, continue to influence events, maintaining a relationship to *People's Will* and weaving even his jailors into his plots and lies. He was found dead in his cell in 1882 under mysterious circumstances.

Among the revolutionary movement (nihilist or not) in the post-Nechaev period there was a clear division. This split was between the propagandists (who followed Russian émigré Peter Lavrov who published Forward! in Paris) and what was called the Bakuninists who believed in pushing the peasants into immediate social revolution. The focus of both groups was on 'organizing' the peasants. This included a Russian version of 'Freedom Summer' (which actually stretched to two years 1873 and 1874, the second of which was coined 'mad summer') where young men and women, in groups of 3 and 4, traveled to the rural villages to live, work and agitate among the peasants. This was inspired, in large part, by the belief that the Russian institution of the village commune was the shortest path to Russian socialism. The commune was a self-governing body that managed some village affairs and made decisions collectively.

The rural effort was a complete failure. The peasants often handed the nihilists over to the police before even getting a sense of what they were around for. The nihilists 'disguised' themselves as peasants with the unsurprising result of being entirely obvious from the moment they walked into a village. Furthermore, the concept of rural revolt was a-historical at the least, as the peasants did not have the ability to arm themselves in a meaningful way and did not actually have a tradition of successful uprising. The Russian, Ukranian, and Cossack revolts in the 17th and 18th centuries were quickly suppressed. The only near success, which began before the nihilists arrived on the scene, was in the Chigirin area on the River Dnieper near Kiev. In 1877 three revolutionaries, Stefanovich, Deutsch and Bokhanovsky, drafted a charter purporting to come from the Tsar calling on the peasants to take up arms — which they did, in the form of (antiquated) pikes, other farming equipment and a body of peasants one thousand strong. Hundreds

of peasants were arrested and sent to Siberia, and the three nihilists were imprisoned in the Kiev gaol in what became known as the Chigirin affair.

A preliminary note on the role of women in the nihilist organization is in order. While, given their tenuous social gains under Alexander II, women were less easily convincible to join the project of dismantling society, once engaged were, if anything, more committed to action, violence, and seeing the project through, then their male counterparts. This is best exemplified by the direct taking up of arms during the revolutionary period beginning with the action of one woman, Vera Zasulich. Once the taking up of arms and the formation of secret societies was in full swing, women took no small part in the proceedings. An accounting in the *People's Will*, the most famous of the nihilist secret societies, states that 1/4 to 1/3 of the organization were women. Nearly half of the *Executive Committee* were women. While the social mores of the culture that the nihilists came from were not entirely upset, which meant that there was still 'women's work' — namely housework and typesetting, on the whole women had egalitarian relationships with the men.

There were many secret societies formed in the revolutionary period. Two of them, *the Troglodytes* and the *Revolutionary-Populist Group of the North* eventually settled into forming the second iteration of *Land and Freedom* in 1876 (although the name was not settled until 1878). This group resolved itself as firmly in the Bakuninist camp in reaction to the failures of the rural campaigns of years past. The notable events of the seventies originated in this reaction.

In December of 1876 there was a political demonstration in the Square of Our Lady of Kazan in St. Petersburg. When the police broke up the meeting they arrested, and convicted to 15 years of prison, a latecomer to the protest, a known revolutionary named Bogolyubov. He then, in an unexplainable act of intransigence, refused to take off his cap for the visiting General Trepov who was reviewing the prison he shared with the political prisoners of the trial of '193'. The infuriated General beat him on the spot and demanded he be flogged the next day, which was done with such vigor that Bogolyubov went mad. This resulted in a prison riot.

> "Bars of cell windows were torn off and beaten against the doors, and prisoners were reputedly tied up by warders, beaten, kicked and hauled unconscious to the punishment cells. Outside the prison Trepov's act created widespread indignation by no means confined to professed revolutionaries. A Russian gentleman's honour was especially sensitive where the striking of blows was involved, and so Bogolyubov's punishment was taken as a monstrous affront to the whole revolutionary movement, staffed as it very largely was by young people who retained certain social pretensions." (Hingley)

Vera Zasulich was not personally acquainted with the principle actors but took it upon herself to take action. She sought an audience with the General in a reception room of Russian officials where upon she drew a revolver from her muff and fired, killing him. In an unexpected move the regime allowed for Zasulich to be tried by a jury, assuming that because she confessed to the act, they had the weapon, and there were witnesses, that the result was guaranteed. Instead the jury acquitted her and upon leaving the courthouse, where the police awaited her for additional arrest, a small riot occurred resulting in her being whisked away by her comrades. This act, and the accompanying scandal, launched a several-year wave of action from the nihilists against agents of the state, and attempts, mostly failed, at repression by the state.

In January of 1878 the Odessa police raided the printing press of Ivan Kovalsky who defended himself and his press with revolver and dagger (thereby creating a tradition of nihilists fighting it out till the end with the police) while his comrades burnt incriminating documents and attempted to incite the crowd gathered around for the spectacle. Kovalsky was eventually captured, tried, and put to death as the first Russian political execution of the time.

On the first of February, 1878, a police infiltrator was killed by revolutionaries, and a note informing the public of the execution was posted in Kiev, bearing the seal of the Executive Committee of the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party (an imaginary organization). On the 23rd of February, Valerian Osinsky a nihilist from the south, shot the public prosecutor of Kiev twice. The victim was unhurt (perhaps due to the thickness of his fur coat). On May 25th, Gregory Popko stabbed to death Captain Geyking of the Kiev gendarmerie on a corner of the main thoroughfare of the city, and then escaped by fatally shooting a doorkeeper who tried to stop him and wounding a policeman. Michael Frolenko, a southern nihilist, became an employee of the 'impregnable' Kiev gaol and quickly rose to the rank of chief warder. On May 27th he walked Stefanovich, Deutsch and Bokhanovsky (of the Chigirin affair) out of the prison walls where they spent a week on the Dnieper River rowing to safety.

The northern nihilists began catching up to the exploits of the southerners in August.

> At nine o'clock in the morning on one of the main streets of St Petersburg, Sergey Kravchinsky walked towards General Mezentsov, Chief of Gendarmes and Head of the Third Section, who was on the way to his office. Kravchinsky held a dagger lightly wrapped in newspaper; after passing the General, he thrust it in his back and twisted it, then leapt into a carriage drawn by Barbarian, a famous trotter, and escaped. (Hingley)

This was particularly notable because it happened two days after the execution of Kovalsky by the state.

February 9th of 1879 was the date of the shooting of Governor General Dmitry Kropotkin in Kharkov, cousin to Peter Kropotkin, by Gregory Goldenberg. Also in February of that year was the death of another police infiltrator and another gun battle with the police in Kiev. April 2nd was the attempted assassination of the Tsar by Alexander Solovyov who fired, and missed, five times, the Tsar suffering nothing more than a hole in his outer coat. Solovyov was hanged on May 28.

The repression over the next 8 months was severe, with 16 Nihilists being hanged throughout Russia including 14 in the region of Kiev. Remarkably, the only three nihilists (Popko, Kravchinsky and Goldenberg) who actually killed people escaped the scaffold. Popko escaped, Kravchinsky escaped to London (to be run over by a train) and Goldenberg hung himself after confessing his crimes to a fellow 'revolutionary' (actually police agent) who was planted in the cell with him. On the 20th of February 1880 a nihilist named Miodetsky took a shot at one of the two Governor Generals in charge of the repression, Governor General Loris-Melikov. Once again he missed his shot and was executed two days later. Nihilists made up in enthusiasm what they lacked in marksmanship.

The repression of the state raised the question, in stark terms, as to how effective the current strategy of *Land and Freedom* was. In June 1879, a conference was held to evaluate the methods of violence used by the group. This resulted in the dissolution of *Land and Freedom* and the creation

of *Black Repartition*, which held that militant propaganda was the appropriate method for moving forward, and the *People's Will*, which condemned the Tsar to death. *Black Repartition* exits the stage as they leave the arena of direct contestation with the state, but they are of note as the location of George Plekhanov, the most notable Marxist of the time and up to the period of 1905..

Before the exposition of the final act of the Russian nihilists play, it is worthwhile to take pause. Beyond just assassination plots and reading literature, the nihilists were engaged in what they believed was a deep challenge to all aspects of Russian life. Along with atheism, non-monogamy, bank robbery (with several tunneling episodes to their credit), and forgery (especially of the 'passport' documentation that served as the Russian's primary identification papers) the nihilists lived in communal apartments with people their own age, sharing resources, and devoting their lives to 'the cause'. The state made attempts to infiltrate the nihilists; in return the nihilists also infiltrated the state. Their subterfuge of the Kiev gaol has already been mentioned, but far more significant was the nihilist by the name of Nicholas Kletochnikov, who actually infiltrated the secret police (the Third Section), feeding the nihilists names of informers, locations of planned raids and copies of official seals. The popularity of the secret society gave the nihilists a degree of seriousness that doesn't exist in the more 'counter-cultural' parallels to their lifestyle today, but the attempts at living both within and against the current order continues to be popular in the same way.

The last act of the Russian nihilists

After the dissolution of *Land and Freedom*, the *People's Will* devoted themselves to the assassination of the Tsar. They did not see this death as linked to a larger social struggle. They did not have the infrastructure, social solution, or desire to assume power, and believed that the institution of the Russian autocracy was firmly in place. Their desire was not a *coup*, it was vengeance. The nihilists also held on to the belief that if their positive actions towards social change (like their organizing of the peasants) were so easily thwarted by the malevolence-of-neglect by the state than negative action (like assassination) would more likely result in substantive change in the system. Finally there was a fatalist and deeply-held belief that destruction was worthwhile for its own sake, and not because of humanitarian, political, or social reasons.

After assessing the failures of nihilist sharpshooters the decision was made to attack the Tsar with demolitions. In November of 1879 the nihilists attempted to mine the train route that the Tsar would take from Livadia, on the Crimean coast near Yalta, to St. Petersburg at three different points. The first was made near Odessa, organized by Vira Figner, and involved the attempt to insert a nihilist into the position of railway watchman, but when the Tsar took a different route this plan was abandoned. The second happened just outside Aleksandrovsk and involved an intricate plan of nihilist Andrei Zhelyabov (1850–1881) to portray the launching of a tannery business by day and to plant dynamite by night. When the train carrying the Tsar came through the explosives refused to ignite. The final point was organized, by Alexander Mikhaylov, near Moscow. It involved the renting of an apartment a mere 50 yards from the rail line, the digging of a tunnel from the apartment to the line and the setting of the charge at the train line. Naturally this plan sounds better on paper than in practice. The digging involved several more people than the neighbors believed lived in the apartment, which prompted the response to the queries about the household's food consumption to be levied against a legendary cat and not a group of

nihilists digging a tunnel to assassinate the Tsar. As with most tunnel digging, disposing of the dirt from the tunnel involved a system of dragging the dirt out of the tunnel and into a spare bedroom and then scattered through the yard at night. Naturally the land through which the tunnel lay was sandy and easily flooded resulting in an entirely miserable experience. As they approached the tracks the deafening sound of each passing train confirmed each diggers worst suspicion that they were about to be caved in upon. Naturally the train containing the Tsar was not the one derailed by the firing of the explosive; the only casualty was the Tsar's jam from his Crimean estate.

As no nihilist was captured and the explosion was a close call there was a general consensus that this was the right approach. The next attempt was made at the Tsar's Winter Palace on the 5th of February 1880. It involved a nihilist taking a job within the palace, smuggling amounts of dynamite into the cellar, and at the appropriate time igniting this explosive, taking out the guard's quarters in between. Once again the timing of the action was off. The scheduled arrival of the Tsar was delayed which meant that the explosives went off prior to Alexander's arrival. Eleven people were killed and fifty injured. The next attempt involved the submersion of a hundredweight of explosive under the Kamenny Bridge on the Catherine Canal, which the Tsar had to pass to travel to the train station, which was thwarted by the tardiness of one of the conspirators. Another attempt began as the ambitious mining of a road that the Tsar would pass from the harbor to the train in Odessa. When the Tsars travel plans changed the effort was abandoned.

The rest of 1880 found the nihilists concerned with tracking the traveling arrangements of the Tsar. They found that Sunday was the best day to strike, as the Tsar usually followed a singular route to and from the military reviewing grounds. It was on the corner of the Nevsky Prospekt and Malaya Sadovaya Street where the nihilists would strike. This involved renting an apartment, digging a tunnel and attempting to act like proper citizens. Their failure to convince their neighbors resulted in a raid on their premises by an inspecting party who did not happen to notice the piles of wet earth covered by straw and coke. On the 27th of February, Zhelyabov, the organizer of the operation, was arrested — which almost brought down the operation.

After the Tsar reviewed the troops, on March 1st, he visited his cousin the Grand Duchess Catherine. This meant that he would not likely travel the intersection where the nihilist plot was focused and instead required the use of the small (five pound) homemade hand grenades that were prepared for such a possibility. Four nihilists put themselves into position; two were able to launch their bombs, the second catching both the Tsar and Ignatei Grinevitski, who threw the bomb, both of whom died. Five members of the plot to assassinate the Tsar were ceremoniously hung on April the 3rd, wearing a placard stating 'Tsaricide'. Those hung included Andrei Zhelyabov, Nicholas Rysakov, Sophia Perovsky, Nikolai Kibalchich and Timothy Mikhaylov. Their hanging was not by the dropping of the floor, or the breaking of their neck, but by the slow suffocation of those hung. The deaths took such a long time, and were so public, that the result was a loss of face for the regime.

Thus ends the period of Russian nihilism. The heir to the throne of Russia, Alexander III (1884–1894) was an autocrat in the old style, brutally suppressed any remaining nihilists who dared show themselves after the fall of the Tsar. He believed in ruling the empire by 'nationalism, Eastern Orthodoxy and autocracy' with which he was successful until his death. At which time his son Nicholas II took the throne to be toppled by the Russian Revolution of 1917.

That nihilism has continued to be an overlooked branch of the socialist tree is surprising given the innovations of the movement. Beyond just the nihilist approach to social change, which has

clearly been influential far beyond the socialist tradition, is the systematic way in which nihilists attempted to extend their ideas beyond just their politics. Given the repressive environment in which their ideas flourished, the breadth and scope of the Russian nihilists continue to bear the fruit of committed individuals bridging the gap between theory and practice.

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Chapter 2: What is Left? Nihilism vs. Socialism

The history of socialism is a noble tradition. It has been an epithet used by tyrants to curse their enemies and a flag by which working people transformed their workplace and the societies that they lived in. Almost every story we hear that involves someone standing up to authority involves socialism. It is the valiant story of individuals and groups who attempted to transform the status quo of their time against overwhelming odds. Socialism has changed peoples' expectations of rights, fairness, work, and the kind of leadership they should expect.

On the one hand, socialism has completely transformed society over the past 200 years. More than just the revolutions that have had some success in various parts of the world under a socialist flag, socialism can be directly credited for the existence of unions that defend workers rights, a universal education system in most parts of the world, a general health care system (especially in many Western countries), and a system that hybridized elements of State protectionism and laissez fair capitalism.

On the other hand, socialism has been an abject failure. Socialism has never usurped Capitalism, in a meaningful or long lasting way, as an economic system. Most socialized systems of care balance the cruelty of benign neglect with the indifference of the queue. Even Libratory Socialism concerns itself primarily with navel gazing, the cacophony of the mob or the selfishness of the individual. Socialism has served better as a corrective to a world-system than it has as the transformation of one system for another.

The family tree

Socialism comes out of a historical lineage of ideas that stretches from the Ancient Greeks, the Polish Socinians, the Enlightenment and classic liberalism. While it is primarily understood as a political philosophy in resistance to the status quo of the 19th and 20th centuries it actually agreed with the majority of the choices that those in power made. It agreed that aboriginal people, wherever they were found, should be integrated into the life of the society, it agreed with the rise of industrialization (with very few exceptions), and it agreed with basic economic principles (wealth, price, exchange).

The tendencies in socialism that came to be known as 'Marxist' or 'Communist' exemplify this position. The rhetoric was always that the goal was the direct and communal control of society for the common benefit of all members. The reality was two-fold. The conception of history that came out of the Marxist tradition (dialectical materialism) dictated that the transformation of society would pass through capitalism, as it had through feudalism, to transform into socialism and eventually communism. This meant that progressivism was embedded within this (the dominant) branch of socialism. This meant (especially prior to the Russian Revolution) that the path to revolution had to pass through the industrialization of society, and that the places where industrialization was most advanced were the places where socialist revolution was most likely to occur. Imagine the surprise when the backward (industrially speaking) country of Russia became

the location of the first socialist revolution. This surprise must have transformed to horror when Lenin's policy of War Communism and the New Economic Policy, which mimicked the worst aspects of capitalist extraction of value and allowed a limited return to free trade, became the baseline on which the Soviet economy was based.

To what extent did the libertarian tradition in socialism also represent this position? While the basic position of libertarian socialism seems innocuous (who could be against 'freedom' or 'liberty'?) the actual positions taken by libertarian socialists mirror the larger socialist movement. Instead of arguing for the creation of an administrative body to manage the transformation to a socialist society, libertarian socialists argue for 'self-management' in 'free federations' to deal with the question of power. Outside of the question of how practical (or often) these ideas are in a moment of contestation with the status quo is the question of what this practice means for libertarian socialists and whether this practice has informed socialism as a corrective to the worst excesses of the Capitalist system or as the correct vehicle for the transformation of society.

The primary mechanism by which libertarian socialists have practiced their socialism is by attempting to "build the new world in the shell of the old." This practice extends from the idea that the socialist society must be exemplified by our behavior today. In order to create a self-managed society libertarian socialists would begin by self-managing their current struggles and organizations. In addition they would connect these self-management schemes through 'federalism' that would give them the ability to engage in self-defense and share resources. Over time, and especially in the past few decades these ideas have become increasingly popular in the capitalist space. Many work places no longer organize themselves in the classic 'pyramid' structure with a boss at the top and a clear organizational structure built on top of the line worker. Instead these work places have integrated the innovation of 'self-management' and allow for 'teams' to assume responsibility for the amount and form of their production. Arguably these innovations have been superficial, as the pyramid structure hasn't been entirely destroyed but the experience of the line worker has qualitatively changed. Consumer cooperatives have benefited from libertarian principles. By cutting out the profit motive, they provide low cost services and goods to their members. By operating under principles of representational democracy there is a degree of control and participation far beyond the typical corporation. The secondary mechanism of libertarian socialist practice has been in revolutionary moments. Here it has always experienced the tension of its, ultimately, humanist perspective with the exigency of the revolutionary moment. This is best exemplified by the events in Spain where the CNT joined with the Catalan government in a common front against Franco's fascism. This decision was based on the fear of isolation by the CNT and the belief that it was a higher priority to defeat fascism than to finish the revolution. Placing the war before revolution meant, ultimately, collaboration with the state against the revolution.

If socialism has been, at best, a corrective to the worst excesses of Capitalism then where else can we draw our inspiration from? If the mainstream of socialism (so called state socialism, communism, or social democracy) is solidly interested in the same progressive, economic assimilation as the dominant world then we could look to its rivals. If these rivals (libertarian and utopian socialists) have shown that they are co-optable or worse, that they are not capable of being effective in the time of crisis then where do we turn? If people couldn't effectively combat the system of the 19th century when it was just becoming a worldwide system rationalizing everything, including its opposition, what hope do we have today long after the fact?

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Russian Socialism

100 years later socialism was transformed by traveling to the rest of the world. African and Arab Socialism were innovations that reflected experiences that were authentically different than the socialism of the European Continent. The problem was that they were also directly reactionary to the Soviet Experience and were thus limited in their scope. They assumed colonialism, Marx, and a certain degree of nationalism. While these assumptions were relevant given the circumstances in which they occurred, they transformed these socialisms into purely political practice instead of more general political philosophy.

During the 19th century there was a strain of what is called socialism that, arguably, did originate outside of the mainstream of European thought. This Russian socialism prefigures Arab and African socialism in that it attempted, although by no means in these terms, to externalize the Russian experience in the vehicle of socialism. What Russian socialism had in common with European socialism was a belief in science as the means by which Christian parochialism could be challenged and by which the world could be truly understood. It also shared connection, through Russian émigrés like M. Bakunin and A. Herzen, to the greater Socialist movement happening in Europe. This is where the similarities end.

Philosophically the trajectory that Socialism was part of, the Liberal Tradition, advocated freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of thought. Even if the mainstream of Socialism eventually took a different tack from this origin, the basis of the Socialist project was in these values. These values were not part of the Russian experience. Instead Russian socialism started from a rejection of morality, truth, beauty, love, and social convention. As a political philosophy Russian socialism begins by questioning the validity of all forms of authority and ends by practicing the adage "The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!" The Russian Socialists did not see the path to social revolution as progressive. Instead of seeing an industrial proletariat as the revolutionary agent the Russians saw their own rural peasantry. In 1861, when the peasants were freed from servitude but chained to debt, the Russian Socialists believed an uprising was inevitable. When it did not occur, nor could be inspired to occur, the Russian Socialists took action. Instead of locking themselves up in the Library of England for 10 years the Russian socialists moved into group houses with their comrades, took daring and ridiculous actions (like handing a socialist pamphlet to the sitting Tsar), and eventually committed Tsaricide. Of course, we know the Russian Socialists by another name, Nihilists.

Nihilism meet Anarchism

> "Not until the movement started by Proudhon had reached Russia did the "propaganda of action" come into it. In Russia the government, controlling the military, was able to check instantly any movement which might appear in any of the few big cities. In the country no movement could have effect."

Marshall Everett

Libertarian Socialists also had another name that may be useful to differentiate from it from its Socialist brethren, anarchism. If Libertarian Socialism is overly concerned with self-management, federations, and workingmen's associations then anarchism may very well have been concerned

with how to integrate the Russian innovations of nihilism. Bakunin is the case in point. Revisionists, of the Libertarian Socialist stripe, would focus entirely on Bakunin's positive agenda of arguing for collective action to achieve anarchy; freedom of press, speech and assembly; and the eventual voluntary associations that would federate to organize society, including the economy. They do not attend to his negative agenda of demolishing political institutions, political power, government in general, and the State. As Bakunin provided the Nihilists with a formative gift in his essay "Reaction in Germany" (1842), he also received a gift from the practice of the Nihilist Dmitry Karakozov and his failed assassination attempt of the Tsar Alexandar II. Ten years later this nihilist practice (that was is full swing by this time) became the policy of the largest anarchist federation on the European Continent. This so called "propaganda by the deed" is the primary historical vehicle by which we know anarchism (and which Libertarian Socialists spend much of their time apologizing for and distancing themselves from).

> "Terrorism arose because of the necessity of taking the great governmental organization in the flank before it could discover that an attack was planned. Nurtured in hatred, it grew up in an electric atmosphere filled by the enthusiasm that is awakened by a noble deed." The "great subterranean stream" of nihilism thus had its rise. From nihilism and its necessary sudden outbreaks anarchism borrowed terrorism, the propaganda of action."
>
> *Sergius Stepniak*

The difference between "propaganda by the deed" and the nihilist practice of assassination is intention. The anarchists continued, due to their relationship to Socialism, to believe in a positive, progressive route toward their social ends and to be engaged in violence against heads of states and their lackeys with the (utopian) belief that the population bearing witness to these acts would both see the fallibility of power AND would rise up to fill this void. The nihilists had no positive intentions. In the parlance of modern anarchism they only desired to take direct action against great offense.

> "Anarchism and nihilism are two words familiar to the young and now attractive to them. They do not believe in building a new society within the shell of the old. They believe that the old must be destroyed first. That is nihilism. In a way it is the denial of the "here and now."
>
> *Dorothy Day*

Let us state it clearly. The Socialist conception of history is a progressive tradition. The Marxists call it historical materialism and it is well stated, in their own language, by this quote from the Preface to Marx's Contribution to the Political Economy

> No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the tasks itself arises only when the material conditions of its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.

The Nihilist concept of history was not progressive. The Nihilist's opposition to the state is just a special case of his or her opposition to almost everything: the family, traditional art, bourgeois culture, comfortable middle-aged people, the British monarchy, etc. and is not oriented around their formulation of how to achieve a better world. In practice there were plenty of Nihilists who may have desired an anti-statist communal society but did not particularly see their resistance to the regime as linked to this desire.

Socialism will continue to have its adherents, who are attracted to its perspective of history, its democratic perspective of inclusion and participation, and its apparent dominance in the field of social contestation. Its criticism of Nihilism begins with the position of deep revulsion at its a-humanist perspective and practice. If we were to review the history of Socialism, we would see that a rejection of humanism is not necessary to inflict involuntary horrors upon real living people. If there is a lesson to take from the Soviet Union, The People's Republic of China, or the Khmer Rouge it is that good intentions, and the practice of historical materialism, can stack up the bodies as well as the systems they would oppose.

What Nihilism provides then is an alternative to the alternative that does not embed an idealist image of the new world it would create. It is not an Idealist project. Nihilism states that it is not useful to talk about the society you 'hold in your stomach', the things you would do 'if only you got power', or the vision that you believe that we all share. What is useful is the negation of the existing world. Nihilism is the political philosophy that begins with the negation of this world. What exists beyond those gates has yet to be written.

Chapter 3: Nihilism as Strategy

> (Nihilism) stands like an extreme that cannot be gotten beyond, and yet it is the only true path of going beyond; it is the principle of a new beginning.
>
> Maurice Blanchot, *The Limits of Experience: Nihilism*

If we desire another world, what is necessary for us to do to achieve this end? Specifically what changes must we enact personally, socially, and as a movement?[1] Beyond a coming-to-power, what is the task of resolving the contradictions of not only the current methodological system of social organization, but the partial solutions offered by others who would also pursue social power? To what extent must these changes happen now or can they be part of the action-as-consequence?

Here is where nihilism can provide some new perspective. A definition of nihilism[2] could be the realization "that conditions in the social organization are so bad as to make destruction desirable for its own sake independent of any constructive program or possibility." This exposes one of the greatest idealistic flaws of modern activism: The articulation of the specific world-to-be as a result of your actions does not guarantee that world's creation.

It is the tradition of the materialist conception of history that allows for the fallacy of causality to pollute the spirit of today. If production and exchange are the basis of every social structure throughout history then we can limit ourselves to studying them to understand how any transition to another world may occur. Therefore an understanding of economic systems should suffice to understand the strategic opportunities for transition. Since the vast majority of economics is understanding the relationship of institutions (which are only accountable to the current power structure) to each other, such an analysis seems like trying to understand an internal combustion engine from the motion of a car.

Materialism has largely been seen as an incomplete conception of history. This is partially due to the power structures embedded in the formation of most institutions but also due to the moral forces that challenge materialism's functionalist underpinnings. In the simple case, a benevolent God created the universe and has some vested interest in how things happen here. Therefore moral systems exist in the name of God's interests, as stated in holy texts and by fallible interpreters. Since the dispersion of the Reformation and the secularization of the rise of Science, morality is usually defined in relation to politics. This has led to the moral component to Marx's analysis and of the Left in general.

> The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which

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[1] The term movement is used to provide perspective here. It is a matter of scale in Western Culture to begin with the self and end with the society. While we reject this tautology, we embrace the clarity of its apparent simplicity.

[2] There are about as many definitions of nihilism as there are of Anarchism. The difference is that to the extent

pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the lines of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement. [*The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels]

Moral value, or 'good', is defined by the specific cultural values of Europe, of a developed Christian worldview, and the developing beliefs in individualism, meritocracy, and mercantilism. These are still the hurdles that even the most starry-eyed of protesters trip over, sometime spectacularly.[3]

Historical evidence, if it is to believed, would actually demonstrate that the visions of "successful" social revolutionaries have shockingly little to do with the form of the new society they create. Take the French Revolution where the form of class society was to be changed. It did, from the three estates of church, nobility, and commoners to a powerful state, centralized bureaucracy, and burgeoning capitalist infrastructure. All it took was the Committee of Public Safety, a Reign of Terror, and a 15-year Total War effort that would transform warfare forever. For the Russian Revolution many differing tendencies aspired to revolutionary victory. Its eventual leaders called for "All power to the Soviets" and ended up settling for crushing their opposition and enacting the New Economic Policy.[4] The twentieth century has ended with a steep decline in not only successful social change but also a poverty of visionaries who are pursuing change at all.

Anarchism and nihilism share a common antecedent. Bakunin's dictum "Let us put our trust in the eternal spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unsearchable and eternally creative source of all life. The desire for destruction is also a creative desire." in 1842 sparked both movements. Nihilism's cultural peak was in the 1860's, although its activism continued almost to the early twentieth century. It is arguable that anarchists inherited 'propaganda by the deed' from the Russian nihilists. Nihilism's theorists[5] continued to be cited as precursors to the revolutionary activity in Russia until they were 'disappeared' well into the Bolshevik regime.

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that there is a social phenomenon of nihilism it is largely regressive and insular. Anarchism has puppet shows, nihilism only has black coffee and cigarettes.

[3] When that explosive detonated yesterday it broke all the windows in the family's house. I was in the process of being served tea and playing with the two small babies. I'm having a hard time right now. Just feel sick to my stomach a lot from being doted on all the time, very sweetly, by people who are facing doom. I know that from the United States, it all sounds like hyperbole. Honestly, a lot of the time the sheer kindness of the people here, coupled with the overwhelming evidence of the willful destruction of their lives, makes it seem unreal to me. I really can't believe that something like this can happen in the world without a bigger outcry about it. It really hurts me, again, like it has hurt me in the past, to witness how awful we can allow the world to be. I felt after talking to you that maybe you didn't completely believe me. I think it's actually good if you don't, because I do believe pretty much above all else in the importance of independent critical thinking. And I also realise that with you I'm much less careful than usual about trying to source every assertion that I make. A lot of the reason for that is I know that you actually do go and do your own research. But it makes me worry about the job I'm doing. All of the situation that I tried to enumerate above — and a lot of other things — constitutes a somewhat gradual — often hidden, but nevertheless massive — removal and destruction of the ability of a particular group of people to survive. Rachel Corrie (to her mother)

[4] "This policy was initiated in 1921 to replace the policy of War Communism, which had prevailed during the Russian civil war and led to declines in agricultural and (non-military) industrial production… a policy of substituting a tax instead of requisitions; of allowing the peasantry to dispose of their surplus within the limits of "local trade"; of allowing the development of capitalist concessions to a delimited extent, and of state capitalism. This state capitalism, in industry and agriculture, was allowed a considerable field of possibilities in which to develop, while the proletarian government retained control of the key industries, state banking; that nationalization of the land remained and that the state held a monopoly of foreign trade." *Encyclopedia of Marxism*

[5] Chernyshevsky, Pisarev, and Herzen

What does nihilism have to offer beyond a mere avocation of destruction? The nihilist position does not allow for the comforts of this world. Not only is God dead to a nihilist, but also everything that has taken God's place; idealism, consciousness, reason, progress, the masses, culture, etc. Without the comforts of this metaphysical 'place' a strategic nihilist is free to drift unfettered by the consequences of her actions. "A nihilist is a person who does not bow down to any authority, who does not accept any principle on faith, however much that principle may be revered"[6] Philosophically much has resulted from the nihilist ideas on value, aesthetics and practice. Most notably in Adorno's conception of Negative Dialectics, a principle which refuses any kind of affirmation or positivity, a principle of thorough-going negativity. The nihilist tradition includes Adorno, Nietzsche, Bakunin, much of classic Russian literature, Dada, punk rock, Heidegger, existentialist, post-structuralist and post-modern thinkers, and much of anarchism.

What does this really mean on the modern stage? Strategic nihilism allows for the possibility that there is no future. The possibility of radical social transformation then becomes unhinged from the utopian aspirations of its proponents. Their 'hope' can clearly be shown to be disconnected from the social and material reality of both the society as-it-is and the potential society that-could-be. If the destruction of the current order must be achieved, for our own potential to be realized, for its own sake, for the children, it may be better to do it with open eyes than purposely blinded ones. A strategic nihilist understands that an ethical revolution does not create an ethical society. An ethical anarchist is not one concerned with non-utopian social transformation, only an idealized one. A strategic nihilist understands that the infrastructure of the modern world embeds its own logic and inhabitants and the nihilist is willing to toss it asunder anyway.

Vaneigem states in *Revolution of Everyday Life*, that "Juvenile delinquents are the legitimate heirs of Dada." This speaks to a positive nihilism that may be a comforting way in which we can approach the troubling consequences imbedded within nihilism's logic. Anarchists have generally accepted property destruction in their humanist vision of a ethical social change. Things matter less than people. Nihilism informs us that this dichotomy ties us to the world we must supercede, before we are capable of actually having social relationships with people and not things. Strategic nihilism provides us a solution to existentialism and liberalism. It argues for an active pose in this world and for the inviability of reformist solutions. When confronted with the horror of your existence, race towards the bleak consequences, not away. Deal with the **moralism** explicit in your stated irrelevance by identity politics, communism, and postmodernism with a sword in hand. Moralists should be spared no patience.

What if you are struggling in 'the movement'? Nihilism can provide you a suite of tools. The first is deep skepticism. Every action, every meeting, is filled with politicians-in-waiting who are easy to discern, with their plastic smiles and fluency with 'the process'. A strategic nihilism allows its practitioner to see these types for what they are; and the ability to do with them what is necessary by your analysis, and not theirs.

The second is a new eye towards history. Whereas before it may have been easy to get caught up in the details of the who's, when's and why's of the Paris Commune, now it is easy to see the failure in the partiality without getting bogged down in the specific halfmeasures. Time devoted to arguing how many angels dance on the head of a pin is time away from the pursuit of anything else.

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[6] Ivan Turgenev's 1861 novel *Fathers And Sons*

Finally, a strategic nihilist position allows for a range of motion heretofore not available. The ethical limitations of 'doing the right thing' have transformed movements for social change. From pacifists and ethicists who sanctimoniously wait for the club to fall or the strength of their convictions to shatter capitalism, to adherents of the Vietnam-era form of social protest, it is clear that the terrain allowed by morality is bleak and filled with quagmire. Armed struggle groups, who led non-existent masses toward their better world have shown similar failure. If these are not the models that frame your conception of change, you are free to make moves on a chessboard that no one else is playing on. You begin to write the rules that those in power are not prepared for. You can take angles, you can pace yourself, you can start dreaming big again, instead of just dreaming as large as the next demo, action, or war.

Chapter 4: What I wish I had said September 12, 2001

Today, March 11, 2004, there was another major bombing in Madrid, Spain. The 'facts' in the case are still coming out (12 hours later) but it appears that the eye of accusation is envisioning the event as an Al Quaeda plot. The first 24 hours of mainstream news coverage after the September 11 attacks was an interesting glance behind the curtain. Not only were there reports (that I never heard followed up on) of there being additional attacks on government buildings in DC, but the blame for the attacks was all over the map: kind of a who's who of America's shit list.

The coverage then from the anarchist and left press was typically one-dimensional, as the initial response to the new Spain attack appears to be also. An example is in order. The report begins with a round or two of humanist hand-wringing, all about the children, the terror and how targeting 'innocent' people is no way to change the world. Then come the limp accusations about state terror. "How come we are forced to write this lament against the civilian population by a group without a state when the State does really bad things too. The State is even worse than the topic of my moralistic diatribe!" Then there is a point or two about bad policies and how, if there were anarchy, or justice, or whatever-in-the-fuck, this would never have happened. The report is wrapped up with the sober analysis about how we should change the world by changing the fundamental problem and not 'play the same game' as those with missile technology and a standing army.[1]

It is as if there were a central committee writing these things, press release style, making sure that no one is off script. There is no possible way that anyone could believe that there are people fighting a war against the system, people who I may not wish to win, but who am I to judge. Until the day that I take up arms against the state, resisting the enemy on the only field that it understands, I am going to keep my mouth fucking shut about the correct or incorrect ways to fight the totality...

I am not going to tell you about how my eyes are running with tears because of all the children who will not be coming home to parents tonight. My eyes are dry. They are not dry because of the greater crimes of the United States, or Spanish governments. Sure, their crimes are legend, but if I were to cry today about this one crime, what possible chance could I have to ever stop crying. This is the world I live in. If I am not going to burn myself to ash I have to deal with yet another headline about consequences as exactly what it is- people died in the course of a total war where one side has very few options at its disposal with which to attack domination.

My question is, to what extent will there ever be resolution to the Wars of Terror? Just as we know the pattern of behavior of the nonparticipant analysts of this latest action, we also know the behavior of the system itself. Of course there will be increased repression. Of course the ETA (the Basque separatists who were initially accused of the crime but may end up being off the hook

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[1] These thoughts courtesy of the 'anarchist' writer anarcho at anarchism.ws

for this action) will be crushed. More allies will join on to the American-lead War against Terror. More money will be spent that will result in a higher degree of examination into our personal lives and greater amount of militarization of our society. This cycle will repeat until either the entire social apparatus collapses under the weight of its own repressive infrastructure *or* there is total conformity under our compassionate overlords. I am betting on the former.

To defend acts of 'terror' would be to choose to spend an endless period of time debating points of history, philosophy, and values — to what end? I am not convinced that lashing out against the State in media savvy public displays of violence has much connection at all to dismantling it. If I knew that it did, I would use this opportunity to beg your action along this line, or at the very least to ask you to tape me up for my run at the prize. Moreover I am suspicious that what is being presented to me as reality isn't the half of it.

I may not be a believer, and will not be a beneficiary either way, but I also do not think that the conclusion to this 'total war' is going to be anything like we suspect it is going to be. Revolutionaries, of every stripe, have been remarkably, consistently, wrong about the consequences of their behavior. What I do believe is that the radical action taken by a very few individuals today strike more awe in me than terror. The cognitive, spiritual, and a-humanist leap taken on a train in Madrid, much like the one taken by 15 hijackers in 2001, has more value to add to an understanding about what a revolutionary practice is going to look like in the 21st century than a 1000 black blocs or a million demonstrations against the state and for the cameras.

Aragorn!
Nihilism, Anarchy, and the 21st century

Nihilist Animism

Aragorn!

2016

Ultimately everything I do, every project, everything I build, every relationship I start is going to fail. The world, to the extent that I am part of it, is also dissolving. This building/destroying is my expression of a feeling that lives somewhere between the Protestant work ethic, the will to inflict anarchy on the world, and an attitude against the projects of Man. I am satisfied living here, in this unstable place, continuing to do things that will blow away as soon as the center stops holding. I'm satisfied to call this nihilism, not because that is what it is, but because our culture is into naming things and I am into sending lemmings off of the cliffs of their own creation.

There is a current that breezily uses animism as a solution to the "problem of spirituality." I have concerns. An older article on the topic, Sarah Anne Lawless' "The Song of the Land: Bioregional Animism,"[1] both demonstrates and refers to the problems of immediatist spirituality rather well. On the one hand we benefit from the knowledge (mostly from anthropological data) of the seeming parallelism between many peoples (i.e. that everyone, in the past, was an animist) and on the other hand any attempt to practice animism either suffers from being a sort of cultural appropriation or a hokey stab in the dark that does not immediately satisfy a cultural need and feels embarrassingly small compared to the greatness of the whole earth.

There is a painful gap between being (or naming yourself) an animist and feeling the glory of the profane (and holy) things around you. This gap is enormous. It is filled with the monoculture religions, civilization, and technocracy. This trinity makes the compelling claim that the holy holy is in fact achievable by ritual, law, and blinking lights. It claims this with the promise of personal salvation and potential of private revelation by way of priest, urban living, and new cell phones.

It an enormous provocation to say that kneeling alone by the bank of a river and being cleansed by the sacred is a pure, unadulterated animism. It may be a true moment (especially to someone enveloped in spectacle and lies) but it is not a complete one. At some point one packs up the REI equipment in the Subaru and drives back home. Sometime later one posts about it on Tumblr. One is not complete in the moment, but instead is an observer of one's own life. That life can feel like a series of real moments punctuated by gaps of disconnection that look like daily life. Living can be like a problem that can be solved after retirement or whatever.

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[1] `https://web.archive.org/web/20140305154119/http://sarahannelawless.com/2014/02/21/the-song-of-the-land-bioregional-animism/`

Animism (grand, capital A) began to die as the City was being born. This does not mean the urge died, but that urge primarily moves us against ourselves and towards camping trips, Eschatology, and faith–based approaches to the sickness of this world. Our question is whether mediated experiences are the only ones we are capable of. If that is the case, as is likely, then our capacity for revelatory joy is similarly curtailed, all arguments to the contrary. If we are indeed broken are we capable of NOT being broken? As anarchists who have an interest in how the world operates, and perhaps how we could perform as wooden shoes to it, we are naive about what grinding gears mean today. We think it is enough to change the world without realizing that troubleshooting gears is a quarter of what the world does. We have urges but little wisdom about the unforeseen consequences of our small strategies. This is the reason why we are so hungry for the possibility of animism, a spiritual practice where desire and capacity are mapped perfectly.

The reason we will not solve this problem like the little special snowflakes that we are is because of exactly that. Just as monotheism has succeeded in the deception that it represents a personal relationship between you and the almighty (parsed and mediated by priests, ministers, and the dining room table) animism needs a social fabric, outside of the civilized order, to keep warm. This social fabric isn't as simple as playing outdoors with other children, starving for life lessons from the kitchen table where the elders sit and talk, or rituals that help you understand that you are a part of something large. But one can imagine such simplicity. One can imagine life without screens as that life just passed us by, but that is only a fraction of what it would take to live a whole life. While the cell phone may itself be sacred and alive, the things we see on it are mundane and ordinary and make us the same.

It is on infertile land that future spiritual practitioners attempt to live. These are hardscrabble lives, devoid of community or anything but scraps of information of how others did what you are trying to do. In this context it makes perfect sense that racial, silly, or fantastic elements (often the same thing) often infiltrate what is an impossible effort. It's not that we can't "go back," it is that doing so is just as difficult as marching to somewhere completely new (whether Narnia or into the Star Wars universe). The new just seems easier.

What I would propose, what a nihilist animism would entail, would be an acknowledgment that a spiritual endeavor must come from a sociable practice. This might be a conversation between seven of us in the woods, or different sets in different places but it has to pass the test of the I/we. If you can find a group of people who are willing to ride the tension of being individuated, having undergone the great pain of core alienation in the modern world, while not privileging one's own experiences in a group then you could begin. This would look like a long waiting, while the traffic passes overhead, while your devices beep, bop, beep in your car, when you could be doing other things, for the world around you to expose its language to you. This would not happen quickly. It would probably take years and then it could shape a set of principles, a path to walk, that would make sense to your set of people. This is why it is impossible to imagine in this world, the context has shifted too radically to imagine building a set of tools over years before even thinking about using them. The context has shifted too radically to imagine doing anything so long term with sociability.

This long listening project does not make sense in a world of traffic, screens, and bullshit dichotomies like I and we. But this is the start. One, find a set of people, two, find a language. That language should probably not be a public one because the task that comes next is all too vulnerable. We are talking about creating something that the history of the current order has

done a bang–up job of genociding, mocking, and parading in front of the slavering consumers of modern spectacle for their amusement. Keeping this language secret will be nearly impossible in a world of social media but the task isn't nearly complete then. Finally this language has to become meaningful. With it a set of people, who will have to become multi-generational, have to disassemble and recreate a world that does not suffer from monotheism, civilization, and modern technology.

That impossible task set I share with you is the closest thing I would put forward as a recommended practice. A world-weary rebuilding of the very reasons we should do things together at all. A practice I am myself incapable of participating in because I have been broken by the same things as you. My mind is no longer limber enough to learn a new language. My heart is too scarred to do something so honest with a group of new people and too experienced to do it with the monsters I surround myself with (for other reasons). To go deep enough to subvert the conditioning and violence of this world is just impossible enough that I can imagine the kind of person who would attempt it but I have no idea what will result, even in a best case scenario.

I dream of free actors who live without fear. I imagine words that speak beyond comprehension. I imagine the same goals that I have expressed lived by people who care for one another, who laugh at the empty sociability of our era, who are the anarchy unleashed unto the world. I imagine connections to the world that I am not capable of. This impossible set of conditions and potentials is why a nihilist animism appeals to me at all. It names capabilities I don't have in a world I can't imagine living in. That's all one can ask of oneself.

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To Dance With The Devil

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2007

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We would like our relationship with capitalism to be simple; we are against it. But behind the simplicity of taking a firm stance is the tragedy of the anarchist archetype. A fixed stance against capitalism, hierarchy, god, the state, oppression, racism, sexism, homophobia (and more); demonstrating curiosity only to find new things to say "no" to. If anarchism[1] is going to continue being interesting, relevant, or challenging into this century, then our reactionary pose has to be confronted.

Let's establish terms. Let us enclose our understanding of capitalism within an anarchist framework rather than a dictionary definition or being enclosed within it ourselves.

Up till now anarchists have defined themselves along the lines of "people who are against all systems of authority" with the systems listed (usually in about this order) being the state, capitalism, the church, civilization, patriarchy, racism, homophobia, etc. This negative definition follows Hegel's "critique of everything that was hitherto held to be the objective truth,"[2] placing anarchists in the role of being socially conscious solipsists, watching the world they refuse to participate in.

Why, then, doesn't anarchism define itself as the idea of being for such values as freedom and equality? Freedom and equality, much like all the terms anarchists are against, are open-ended words that demand further engagement before anyone has any idea what they mean. Does freedom mean the same thing that the US says it is for and that it institutes as a personal right?[3] Does equality mean the same thing that Communists mean when they refer to it? The taint of the varied uses of these terms has meant that modern anarchists minimize their use of them.

The negative definition of anarchism is not subject to the same scrutiny. Is this because there has never been, nor will there ever be, a regime ruled by the tyranny of being against? Is it perhaps because anarchists do not see their own complicity in the things that they are against (as demonstrated, for example, by their participation in the political process of petition and ballot[4])? Anarchists are a part of the very system they are against. The line between the constituent parts of that whole and the unified whole is left, by and large, unexamined.

For this, the activist imagination[5] is largely to blame in recent times. Anarchists draw as much, if not more, on the perception that the Civil Rights and anti-war movements of the Sixties were effective models of political and social change. As a result they draw inspiration from the so-called influential militants rather than the spontaneous actions of people, from the meeting and the protest rather than the riot or work slowdown, from the politics rather than the humans. This practice turns the negative definition of anarchism on its head as a positive and reactionary view of social change.

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[1] The term used throughout this article is anarchism. While I generally support the idea of there being a distinction drawn between a system called anarchism and the desire for something called anarchy, with one being critiqued as an ideology and the other as something else, I also believe that it is a waste of time to confuse the terms with the distinction. In addition, the amount of attention placed on the difference between the two terms has created an anarchyism, an ideology of terms. As a consequence the critique of ideology has become a parody of itself.

[2] Marcuse, Herbert; Reason & Revolution. Part II, The Rise of Social Theory www.marxists.org

[3] Which isn't actually true. The Declaration of Independence only refers to free states; the Bill of Rights refers to the freedom of speech, the press, assembly, petition, and arms.

[4] Even to the extent of participating in the elections of politicians (mayor of Arcata, Gonzalez in SF) and petitions (which is what protests are) to the state.

[5] The activist first and foremost believes in her/his own role in cause-and-effect. Their imagination leads them to believe, "If we activists do X, then the government/company/agency/group/person will do Y. And if Y (or any compromised version of Y) happens, then we are responsible and should take our bows and issue our press releases."

We must learn the moves

To the extent that an anarchist definition of capitalism deviates from the Marxist one, it does so along the lines of being emotional and value-laden.

> For the capitalist and the property owner it [property] mean[s] power and the right, guaranteed by the State, to live without working, the power and the right to live by exploiting the work of someone else, those who are forced to sell their productive power to the lucky owner of both[6]

or

> Capitalist... economies make human interactions into commodities: policing, medical care, education, even sexual relations become services that are bought and sold.[7]

This follows the habit of otherworldliness; defining a system that each of us partakes in as separate and outside of ourselves and our activity. While They exploit, force, and commodify, we do something else entirely. Organize resistance, plant community gardens, group bike rides, or protesting them, something outside of their recognition.

The useful thing about the negative anarchist definition of capitalism is that it is not ambivalent, describing capitalism as some post-modern creature that we can pretend to have a relationship of power with, as the culmination of history, or something that could be taken or left.

A distinct element of the anarchist understanding of capitalism is that it uses the same language of personal responsibility (although in this case, that of others) that is used to determine one's own behavior. The way you challenge the commodification of human life is to change your relationship with commodities personally; by consuming less, consuming more strategically, or consuming on "your terms." Capitalism is understood less as a social phenomenon than as a violation of the anarchist principle of means and ends being inseparable.

The Marxist definition of capitalism, by contrast, is not subjective. Capitalism is the mode of production that extracts the greatest possible amount of surplus value by the class of private owners, and that consequently exploits labor power (aka the proletariat). This definition is about value, class, power, and production. Those who hold to this economic orientation further claim that through a scientific evaluation of economics, particularly the labor theory of value, the problems with capitalism can be dissected and deeply understood. Furthermore the solutions provided as socialism, or more radically as communism, arguably have been analyzed through this scientific process rather than a subjective one.

This definition leaves out most human understandings of what living capitalism is. Capitalism is not living on credit, paying rent, dealing with bureaucrats, not having the time to spend with friends and loved ones, but is the exploitation of one's labor power by the productive forces, thereby creating class tension. The struggle to understand oneself in capitalism (by this definition) is the class struggle, a conflict which, when resolved, is the only hope for the oppressed class.

Political power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another. If the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by the force of

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[6] Cutler, Robert M. (ed.); From Out of the Dustbin: Bakunin's Basic Writings 1869–1871 (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985).

[7] CrimethInc.; Fighting For Our Lives: an anarchist primer

circumstances, to organize itself as a class; if, by means of a revolution, it makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class.[8]

For anarchists the useful characteristic of this definition is to understand the objective, in this case economic, gaze. It is often said that if you want to read a mainstream perspective that takes Marx seriously you need to read the Wall Street Journal. They may rarely mention his name but economic tension, class conflict, is managed by the readers of the Journal while the rest of society obsesses about the plight of celebrities and reality show outcomes. At the same time that this objective calculation of our situation is useful, it is also a mechanism by which our powerlessness to bring about any change in the situation is rationalized and perpetuated. For every laughable Communist denunciation of anarchist optimism is an anarchist demand for class war by the children of the rich. Rhetoric aside, the only real class war is of the owners against all.

Classic Liberals define capitalism as the social system based on the principle of inalienable individual rights, including life, liberty, and property. This definition is the most common ideological understanding by Americans. It accepts the notion of a society comprised of a balanced relationship between individuals and the ruling order, ie the state. A place where self-governing rational individuals respect each others' rights, the state is checked by the process, and keeps out of the way of the citizenry. This Lockean notion underscores a kind of theoretical logical consistency that sits well for many defenders of the current economic system by placing our role as rational actors on a stage of somewhat human scale. The disconnect between this idea (with its ethnocentric notions of property, rationality, and the individual) and the reality of the state's monopoly on violence, determines exactly how much life, liberty, and even property the individual is actually allowed to have.

Anarchists would do well to recognize liberal capitalism's reliance on the social building blocks of principles (rights), negotiation (the social contract), and checks-and-balances (voting). Capitalism-as-exchange ends up being invisible in this definition of capitalism, and that is what makes this definition such an effective way to defend intellectually the relationship one has to capitalism. Unchecked domination, inherited power, and the irrationality of believing in the state's desire to defend an individual's rights are invisible here. Who could be against rights, the ability of individuals to enter into contracts with each other and the state, and our ability to keep the state in check? This is the way people can understand themselves within a functioning social order where their own invisibility within it is far less important than the obviousness of defending every aspect of it. Sometimes if it seems believable then it is believed.

Finally, capitalism is defined in the US as the current economic system in which the means of production and distribution are privately or corporately owned, and profits are gained in a free market. Used in this way, we accept capitalism's ahistorical nature (always existing, outside of context, space, or time) and the existence of a free market. This is another economic understanding that differs from the Marxist one; it has a different mythological framework, one where capitalism-itself is the sun, rather than the exploitation of labor.

In this view, capitalism never sets and each of us if free to sell ourselves as labor and buy cheap products shipped from around the world. Truly free. The sun was placed there before the US was

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[8] Marx & Engels; The Communist Manifesto

founded and since then nothing else has happened; everything here has grown under its light. The freedom we have as consumers is the same as the freedom we have as investors. The connections these ideas have to reality wither in comparison to their rhetorical and propagandistic social power within US culture. This myth is powerful: powerful enough to keep people in misery playing the lottery, powerful enough for people to put themselves in cargo containers to be shipped across the ocean, and powerful enough for people no longer to see capitalism as something to struggle against. Conscious class struggle in the US is a non-starter either strategically or ideologically, Marxist (even marxist-with-a-black-flag) rhetoric to the contrary.

Whether defined by anarchists, Marxists, political philosophers, or economists, the assumptions in defining capitalism frame the ability to think outside, against, and in relation to it. Since anarchists have assumed that they are somehow outside of capitalism, that it is something outside of their experience, their daily lives, and their principles, they have not had a coherent way to engage the liberal notions of individual rights, the economic view of society, or the positive perception that capitalist social relations have had on a preponderance of people.

Under the pale blue moon

Tensile strength is the amount of force required to pull something apart. Most of us test tensility every day and, like many properties, we do not need to measure it to understand its effects. A romantic relationship ends because of a series of small inconsiderations. Workers grumble about an asshole manager but nothing happens besides the complaining. A radical returns to her family home for the holidays even after she has declared her rejection of normative values and relationships. Tensility has a variety of axes: economic, emotional, cultural.

If we were to be generous in approaching an answer to the question of why the current economic system works so well (emotionally, ideologically, materially) for so many people, it would not be because people are naturally inclined towards shopping, petroleum, or property-rights but because they prefer greater tensile strength over less. One desires a connection to the land that they live on that is greater than what a contract, bank, or surveyor can provide. One desires relationships that don't fall easily under the categories of friend, lover, or family. One desires escapes from even the most pleasant situation one finds oneself in. The simplistic solutions of against approaches to these problems are brittle; they crack at the slightest change in orientation from their strength. Critique weakens tensility rather than strengthening it.

The coordination of capitalism with the political apparatus, religion, and cultural expectations regarding relationships makes it seem natural. These relationships developed over time, largely by force, and are worth studying. What is the relationship between the people who go to the same market on Tuesday, the same church on Sunday, and attend the same concerts on Friday nights? Compare this to a group that meets once a year under a flag of truce and spends the rest of the year in open hostility. The anarchist project would be to engage with these examples not because they are worth emulation but because they demonstrate principles of tensile strength.

Tensility can be seen as the relationship between frequency, intensity, variety, and duration of encounters. In the first example we see relationships with relatively high frequency and variety, with low intensity (with occasional high intensity around music) that happens over a long period of time, probably years. In these relationships, even without knowing each other's names, we have a closeness that is not about class composition, shared alienation, or the political project

of the total transformation of society. In the second example there is far less closeness with low frequency and variety but high intensity that happens over a long duration. The difference of tensility between these two examples results not from the participant's connection to a shared struggle or idea but from variety, frequency, and manageability.

If there isn't a simple for to the anarchist against, then perhaps the problem is one of scale rather than goals. As long as society exists on an enormous scale, the scale of 300 million, 1 million, or even a hundred thousand, it is not possible to believe that it will not form a monopoly on violence, an ideological system that preaches freedom while practicing constraint, and an economic system that alienates for the purpose of expediency. Perhaps anarchism is the recognition that a society worth living in should be of a scale within which one can actually have some kind of direct impact.

There is nothing that can be done to reclaim capitalism. Not only has it been the ideological foundation for the extraction of resources and the economic basis of human suffering for centuries, but the term remains a meaningless abstraction. At the same time there is the false opposition of anarchist anti-capitalists; pretending to stand outside capitalism the same way they would stand in protest outside chain stores or a gathering of world leaders reflects the weakness of individualistic action. This isn't improved by the anti-capitalism of left communist traditions whose meek declarations of total opposition are only slightly less individuated than the practices of boycott and self-flagellation.

In this essay there has been no definition of anarchism itself other than to acknowledge the inadequate definitions that have preceded us. In addition, the positive anarchist principles[9] are an inadequate beginning to an anarchism of today; they are the elegant principles of another time. If anarchism is to face the challenging times ahead it must become the mongrel beast born of the disparate parts of its stately and negative origins. It must become capable of recognizing the complicated relationship between living in the world and against the world, and instead of erring in the direction of liberalism or asceticism. Anarchism must never become a contract between anarchists and a society that doesn't exist, and it should never be a settled question. Anarchism is conflict without compromise, without rulers, and with the choice to engage with the world on our own terms. The fight is more important than the outcome.

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[9] Solidarity, Mutual Aid, and Direct Action

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Political Naïveté

or what are we to do about Maoism

Aragorn!

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One of the reasons that anarchism has become a popular political perspective is because in many contexts (for instance mass mobilizations or broad direct action campaigns) we seem open, friendly, and nonsectarian. This is in great contrast to visible (and visibly) Marxist or Leftist organizations, which either seem like newspaper-selling robots or ancient thorny creatures entirely out of touch with the ambivalence of the modern political atmosphere. Anarchists seem to get that ambivalence and contest it with hope and enthusiasm rather than finger-wagging.

The public face of anarchism tends towards approachability and youth: kids being pepper-sprayed, the general assemblies of the occupy movement, and drum circles. These are the images of the past five years that stand in contrast to the image of anarchists as athletic black clad window breakers. Both are true (or as true as an image can be) and both demonstrate why a criticism of anarchists continues to be that (even at our best) we are politically naïve.

Of course very few window breakers believe that breaking windows means much beyond the scope of an insurance form or a janitorial task, but that is beside the point. What matters is that the politics of *no demands* makes the impossible task of intelligent political discourse in America even more complicated (by assuming that discourse is a Pyhrric act). To put the issue differently, the dialectical binary of both engaging in the social, dialogic, compromising act of public politics while asserting that there is no request of those-in-power worth stating or compromising on isn't possible. It is cake-and-eat-it thinking that is exactly why Anarchists must do what Anarchist must do[1].

This rejection of how the game is played *while participating in it* hasn't shown itself to be a long term strategy– impossible never is. For lessons on playing the game we have to turn to the winners of politics and revolution: neoliberalists, sure, but also statist Marxists, reactionaries (from racist populists to nationalist Know Nothings or their descendants in the Tea Party), and what remnants exist of the old and new Left. Just to make the point crystal clear I'll restate it. On the one hand you have the ridiculous non- or even anti-strategy of anarchist political theater that cannot achieve the impossible goal of everything for everybody forever. On the other hand you have realpolitik: the pragmatic application of power in the political sphere. This simplistic dualism is why most intelligent people abandon politics altogether and retreat to NIMBYism (at best) or the quiet solitude of screaming at a television screen as the only expression of engagement with the outside world.

In this light, a discussion about maoism might seem outrageous and it is! Maoism isn't a relevant political tendency or movement in America. It isn't leading guerrilla forces in the hills, it has no leaders-in-waiting just outside the border (unless you count Avakian which you should in no way do), but it isn't further from the mainstream of American political thought than Anarchism is (anarchist big tent populists to the contrary) and is arguably much closer (in an often cited example, the mayor of Oakland, Jean Quan, is a former Maoist). More pointedly, Maoism and Anarchism have been cross-pollinating for decades. Our task here is to shine a light on that history and challenge what benefits anarchists have garnered from this little-discussed pollination.

A defense of anarchism

One may pause here to consider the goal of defending anarchism against Maoism (or any other ideology of the left). Why bother? Isn't anarchism exactly as irrelevant as these other 19th century

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[1] MD On What Anarchists Can Say

ideas? Yes and no. If you are talking about the fights within the First International about what form the revolutionary party will take (secret or public), or the composition of the most advanced working class groups (craftsmen or factory), than yes, absolutely. Even if you are talking about the integrated partisans of the Spanish Civil War, then the term has declined into the merely historical. Of interest perhaps, primarily because of the optimism and ferocity of it's partisans, but really a demonstration of a good liberal university education and not much else.

If, on the other hand, anarchism is the term used to describe an open-ended theory that will not, cannot, be set in stone until the day of days, because it isn't named after a man, because it is named after negation, because it is impossible, then no. In its hostile negative anarchism is a well suited expression of our time.

As anarchism is the theory that we are the ones who directly engage with life, not representatives (whether politicians, NGOs, or community leaders), not systems of control (statistical, bureaucratic, or functional), and not specialists in freedom (authors, etc), then we embrace it. We doubly embrace it if somehow this engagement with life also means the absolute destruction of the system-as-it-is but we know that this destruction—whether called revolution, evolution, or communization—is not guaranteed or even likely in our lifetime. This means that our theory interfaces with the reality of politics and other people every day but without the burden of the correct revolutionary ideology that has in no way been more successful than anarchism, just more bloody.

A little history

I'll leave it to others to do an accurate and deep review of the history of Maoism in the US since the end of the Vietnam War and how it has melted into the firmament of Cultural Studies programs and the counter-cultural left (by way of Refuse and Resist, No Business As Usual, the October 22 Coalition Against Police Brutality, Not In Our Name, the World Can't Wait, etc). My task is to show that there is a weave of relationships rather than to make something functional out of that weave. In the Bay Area the vigor of Maoism as a viable political ideology is entirely due to two factors: the Black Panther Party and the RCP.

While the depth of Maoist politics in the BPP is largely locked up in unreported meetings and allegations that the BPP did a bang up business selling Little Red Books in the late 60s, the Maoist trappings of the BPP aren't in question. We have to contend with the BPP (a relatively small and historical group) currently almost entirely because of their representation in movies and visual media. The BPP continue to be among the most cited predecessors of modern political movements. We all have an image seared into our mind of ourselves, as radicals, engaging with the straight world (whether in the halls of the Legislature or the streets of our towns) wearing visually striking attire, with weapons over our shoulders. Obviously the direct action work (from neighborhood armed defense to feeding and schooling the kids) of the BPP is beyond reproach (if the history of such is to be believed) but this is an entirely different topic than the ideas of The Party per se or the stories of the heroes of the BPP. This is the story of grassroots organizing by any other name; this name just has a solid mythology surrounding it.

It is worth mentioning that I don't in fact have strong feelings about the BPP. The social and political atmosphere that they derive from are so entirely different than ours that I am in no way qualified to make categorical statements about them. They are a historical artifact that can

be, and is, debated as such, but by-and-large this debate isn't an anarchist one (either in name, sentiment, or aesthetic). For many people, recognizing the significance of the BPP (as in the differences between the perceived work of the BPP and the work of radical politics today) is a necessary part of political development. Recognizing the differences between the work of the BPP in the 60s and our work today is how we determine our own project, and that has nothing to do with political ideologies.

The RCP can be more cleanly dealt with. No caveats need apply to this hack organization that should be utterly reviled by any anarchist. Moreover the concept that building up the theory or personality of Bob Avakian (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutionary_Communist_Party,_USA#Activities) as important, revolutionary, or even notable is entirely preposterous .

That said, the practice of rebranding oneself, of spinning up front groups as quickly as new single issues come to the fore, is obviously a smart and pernicious idea. It allows a political organization to control its messaging, gating new members through specific interests rather than through an entire, decades-long political program. It provides a way to show rather than to talk (which is a significant anarchist weakness). It builds relationships through "common struggle" rather than through debate, coercion, or brow-beating. While the result is still the same, this multi-form and layered approach to inculcating new members is persuasive and confusing, exactly the goal of groups that do it.

Mentioning these two groups isn't intended to say that the influence of Maoist ideas, or those of other historical political traditions, can be constrained by these two data points. Modern Maoist thought has become much more diffuse than either of these historic reference points would lead one to believe. We'll get into examples later but when people used to use terms like Imperialism, Revolution, and the Party, they now use terms like gentrification, insurrection, and organization: softer, less disagreeable terms that reflect our time. The point is that political approaches have evolved from specific times and places, and that to understand that genealogy is necessary to defend ourselves from taking these approaches at face value.

A little about ideas

The reason that anarchists should study and reflect on Maoism, in particular, is because (in the words of MIM, an RCP split that dissolved a few years ago) "Maoism and real anarchism have the same long-run goals." (Avakian has said similar things in his critiques of anarchism). MIM (and other explicit Maoists) believe that the only fundamental difference between their perspective and that of anarchists is that Maoists have a plan to implement this shared goal, so their revolutionary program is authentic rather than anarchists' expression of bourgeois ideology. Right ideas + leadership = revolutionary moral authority?

We live in a post-party era, where the traditional left–whether of unions or alphabet groups–has largely disappeared, and the terrain of *anarchistic* political discourse cannot be dismissed with the typical anarchist wave of the hand and a decry against "authoritarianism." By and large, everyone (activists, Occupy, organizers) is willing to say they are anti-authoritarian. The rub is to describe exactly what that means.

The most common place where this discussion is happening couldn't be older, or more historical. It surrounds the concept of the National Question and how one or another perspective has a

solution to it. This concept has its origin in Stalin's working definition of a nation: "a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up, manifested in a common culture." The Maoist revision includes an addendum that "internal colonies" of nations, exist within the belly of countries like the US (or in the rings of French cities). In either case the National Question is a way to frame the issue of how to organize the shock troops of the next social unrest and how to articulate the program of what the fight is about.

In a useful recent exchange about this between two Maoist groups (the Fire Next Time Committee and Signalfire), here is a summary from Signalfire:

> To sum up our stance…it is sufficient to say one step forward, two steps back. In attempting to deal with the real problematic of the 'people of color' discourse and identity politics, it seeks to establish an analysis of race coupled with an analysis of class. In doing so, rather than producing an adequate critique and substantive class analysis, the author simply gives us generalities which interrogated at a basic level are superficial and useless in satisfying the need for a real class analysis of the United States.

> Rather than seeking truth from facts, it telescopes the particularity of experiences into universalities,and simply doesn't have an analysis of class that actually corresponds with the existing class structure. It has rather engaged in another sort of "identity politics" of a Brown/Yellow guilt type in relationship to Black oppression, centering it as a fulcrum for the articulation of white supremacist ideology and class structure.

Obviously the National Question still looms large for Maoists and this terminology should be familiar to anyone who is active in big city radical politics. Understanding these two paragraphs is sufficient to function well in the Bay Area political scene.

To draw the linkage between Mao-eque approaches and anarchist thinking we should talk a little bit about Imperialism, Colonialism, and Gentrification. Obviously, according to a dictionary definition, these three things occur. Colonialism leads to Imperialism (or is it the other way around) and from within Empire the shifting of the economic landscape takes on a similar character that is described as Gentrification. These are descriptive terms to the economic, political, and social character of where we live and how we got here.

What they are **not** are vectors. They don't trace a line from some historical moment (for example, of primitive purity) on through our current horrorshow into a dystopia/utopia. Descriptors are often confused for causes and this is nowhere more clear than from political perspectives that Have Answers, answers that can be argued for, that are believed to be only capable of winning if others are convinced, and finally, ones that create a logical whole, something coherent (as if this world is coherent).

While many anarchists are convinced by this logical procedural thinking, anyone who is opposed to authoritarianism should break with this trajectory when it comes to a history of Imperialism or Colonialism (or even gentrification) that doesn't see the state as a necessary part of the genealogy. A monopoly on violence is entirely necessary to invade, control, and genocide a people. It is only to the extent to which capitalism has taken on this monopoly (if it has) that it has taken center stage as the villain for communists and anti-authoritarians.

For anarchists these questions are much simpler. As soon as monopolistic impulses are discovered the hackles of most anarchists are raised. This means that party discipline or even toeing an ideological line tends to be impossible in most anarchist circles. If you accept the Leninist/Blanquist (vanguard/small cadre) model of revolution then anarchists make poor cadre (but so does everyone else!).

Race

Where does this leave us in terms of the most American of all questions: what about race? How is it separable and inseparable from the National Question as framed by Communists in general, and Maoists in particular? Simply put, it leaves us nowhere. The history of racism generally, and slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, etc in particular, is an integrated part of the story of Imperial America. As residents, and as victims, of that place we should feel obligated to understand that story but we have no power to change it. Revolutionary aspirations to the contrary we cannot manage, dictate, or smash our way out of it, but we also don't have to own it.

Privilege theory places agency on those who have privilege. If one is determined to hold together a pluralist democratic society this kind of thinking is absolutely necessary but what if you don't? What if you are hostile to the conceptual framework that holds together a society of 300 million people (which you can do even while recognizing that this framework is the structure that society itself is built on)?

Respecting the self-determination of a group of people, from an anarchist perspective, should look a lot less like listening to the leaders or elders of a group you aren't a part of, than like finding common cause against those that constrain self-determination in the first place. Primarily this is the state but it's also the economic relationships that subjugate all of us. Respect doesn't mean friendship or agreeing. It means recognition, boundaries, and qualified solidarity.

One common hostility I have towards many anarchists is the general attitude I find that anarchists tend to be *for* good things and *against* bad things. It is a kind of modified kindergarten attitude that makes sure everyone sees each other for the good-intentioned beautiful snowflakes that they are, rather than doing much with all that intention and beauty. At its worst, this attitude makes discussions about personal, emotional issues intolerable, because everybody has to demonstrate to everybody else that they, in fact, are paragons of multi-racial purity. But in fact, everybody, without exception, are bigoted, prejudiced, close-minded idiots. Getting this essential truth out early allows the eventual name-calling of racist, sexist, transphobe, kyriarchiest to be framed appropriately.

We are against bad things, therefore we are also against ourselves.

The Wisdom of Fools

As long as anarchists do not inform ourselves about the myriad of forces that seek to intentionally confuse their project for an anarchist one, we will continue to be fooled by them. More problematically, and over a long enough timeline, this confusion becomes reality. "Anti-authoritarian" becomes a soft way to obscure that you are a Maoist whose "revolutionary program" is what makes you a true anti-antiauthoritarian. "Anti-Imperialist" becomes a way to describe hostility to American foreign policy and not an adherent of the three worlds theory of Maoism. "Decolo-

nization" becomes code for an urban aspiration for an impossible culture instead of a problematic term relating to everything from native resistance to resource extraction, the dismantling of older Empires, or a project of the United Nations.

Perhaps it is too late, at least in the US, at least for my lifetime. We are a culture that has abandoned not just reading but critical thinking on the whole. Watching language morph into its opposite used to be something associated with the totalitarianism of the USSR or Newspeak of Orwell's fictional universe. Debord's spectacle updated this dialectical perversion by demonstrating how capitalism has buttressed the monopoly of violence that used to be a prerequisite for this violence to language. Our meme-tastic, utterly superficial engagement with even political questions like how to live, how to do it together, and who am I in relationship to others, seems to show that pointing to Maoists as a political problem is about as useful as talking about aliens and pyramid power. Anarchy as conflict with the existing order, both state and capital and also the its conceptual framework, is an infinite endeavor.

Hesitations aside I know that someone out there will hear me. They will recognize a political pedigree in the rhetoric of some local blowhard and will be tempted to stand alone in a room, point a finger, and shout *J'accuse!* I would warn you against this line of thinking. If the post-left has anything to teach us it is that being right, and informing others of it, isn't nearly enough. It may be preferable to maintain the affect of the happy fool, the politically naïve, while tilling the soil for the seeds to feed those who will engage in the challenges of how to engage (as anarchists) with politicians. Decrying their *badness* polarizes the point too early in the relationship. Timing means recognizing that the first moment one understands a situation isn't the moment to act. Anarchy means attack and attack means patience.

Links related to text

1. Tyranny of Structureless & Anarchist Response

2. Standing Together to Organize a Revolutionary Movement (STORM)

3. Van Jones

4. More about VJ

5. Reflections on STORM

6. Context

7. More Context

8. Finance

9. Roger White's essay

10. 10 Theses

11. Response to 10 Theses

12. National Question

13. Recent commentary on NQ

14. Unpacking the Knapsack

Aragorn!
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http://aragorn.anarchyplanet.org/political-naivete/

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